



NINA CLARE

MIDWINTER MISCHIEF

The Jane Austen Fairy Tales 2
A variation of Emma

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THE JANE AUSTEN FAIRY TALES

*Midwinter
Mischief*

A VARIATION OF EMMA
VOLUME 2



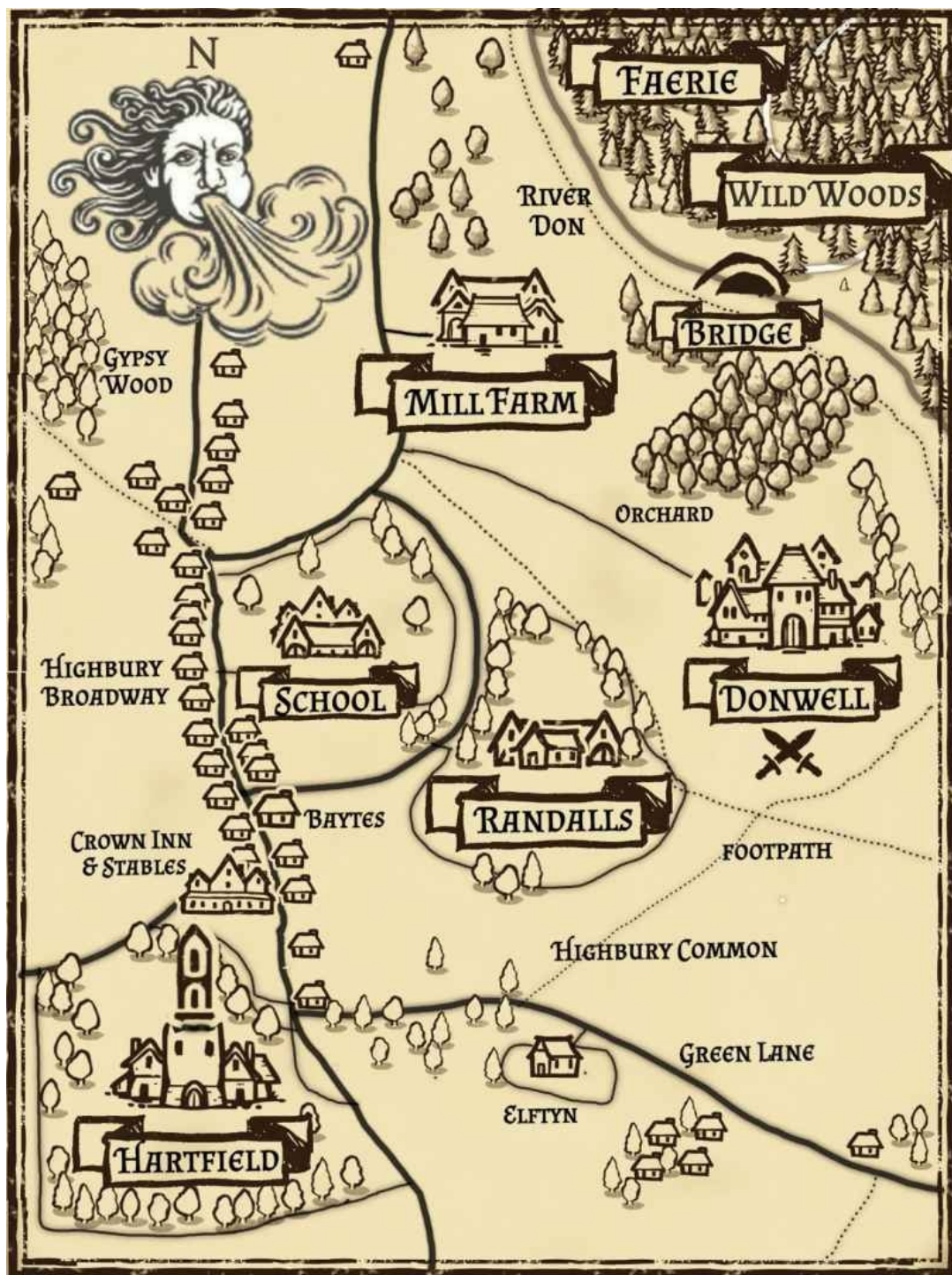
CONTENTS

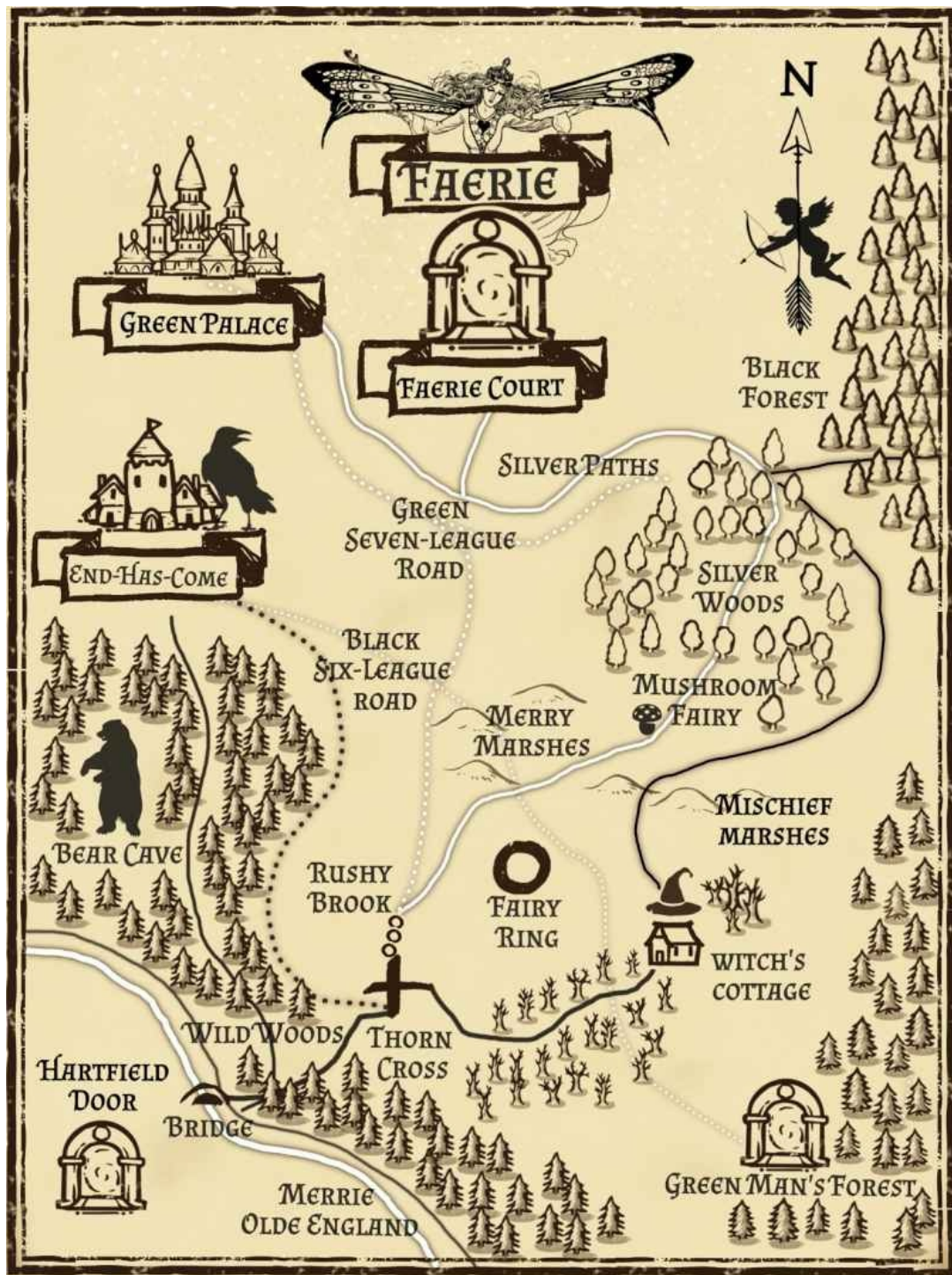
1. [Freaks and Fancies](#)
2. [Into a Scrape](#)
3. [Adventuring Too Far](#)
4. [The Talking Aunt](#)
5. [Poison](#)
6. [An Ungenial Morning](#)
7. [An Unfortunate Acquaintance](#)
8. [Temptation](#)
9. [On the Watch](#)
10. [A Rival](#)
11. [A Delightful Persuasion](#)
12. [A Grievous Business](#)
13. [The Fair Lady](#)
14. [Bad Acquaintance](#)
15. [A Villain](#)
16. [Moments of Regret](#)
17. [A Tea-Visit](#)
18. [Every Hope and Every Fear](#)
19. [Double Dealing](#)
20. [A Line of Shifts and Expedients](#)
21. [The Zeal of a Friend](#)
22. [Impossible Things](#)
23. [High Expectations of Pleasure](#)
24. [A Burst of Threatening Evil](#)
25. [Escape](#)

[What happens next?](#)

[Free Fairy Tale Novel](#)

[Books by Nina Clare](#)





FREAKS AND FANCIES

‘Rue! Wake up!’

Rue opened her eyes and wondered why she was staring up at a grey sky with the smell of stray magic in her nose. Someone, it was Elizabeth Martin, was prodding her in the side with her foot. Rue remembered and groaned.

It was a dream. A nightmare. ‘Tell me, Lizzie, that I just had the worst dream ever.’

‘Get up, you useless half-wit sack of potatoes!’ said Elizabeth. ‘What are you going to *do*?’

Rue sat up, feeling sore all over. Her head and shoulders hurt where she had been struck with pinecones, her backside throbbed from the fall on ice that morning, and now her arm hurt. Judging by the position she’d come round in, she had fallen on it when she fainted.

‘I feel ill,’ she moaned.

‘There’s no time for feeling anything,’ snapped Elizabeth. ‘*Do* something. Turn these poor men back *right now*!’

‘I can’t. I have no magic.’

‘Then send word to Mother Goodword to come back immediately!’

‘I don’t know how to reach her. Where’s Myrtle?’ Rue tried to get up, but felt dizzy.

‘Myrtle isn’t here.’

‘But, her dragon was here. Where’s the dragon?’

‘It ran off. A *dragon* in Highbury! What’s the world coming to?’

Rue had never seen sensible Elizabeth Martin so close to hysteria before, though it was hardly surprising. The wave of dizziness passed, and she got to her feet shakily and looked about at the carnage. Elizabeth was still clutching the frog in her hands, and the sprite was still glaring down at her from the tree.

‘You said I’d turned Ben into a donkey. He’s right there, by his donkey.’

‘Is he now? Just you go and speak to him then.’

‘Are you well, Ben?’ said Rue, moving stiffly towards Ben, who stood holding the leash of the mule.

‘*Hee-haw, hee-hawwww!*’

Rue stared at him in horror. ‘Oh no.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Elizabeth. ‘They’ve swapped places. *You*’ve swapped them.’

Rue looked from Ben, who wasn’t Ben, to the donkey, who must now be... ‘Ben?’ Rue said in a cracked voice. The donkey looked up at her with baleful eyes. He opened his mouth and made a raspy half-bray, as though it were trying to speak. ‘Oh, Ben. I’m right sorry. I’ll sort this out, I promise. Nod your head if you can hear me.’ The donkey nodded slowly and distinctly.

‘Tripe and Tatties, Merciful Mushrooms and Blasted Bullfrogs!’

‘Enough of the blasted bullfrogs, Rue! What are we to do?’

‘Magic,’ said Rue, her mind beginning to race. ‘I need magic. Can’t undo a spell without magic. There’s none to be had in Highbury. I must go...’ She turned in the direction of the river, though she couldn’t see it from where she stood in the stable yard.

‘Go where? Not into Faerie? There’s no way in!’

‘There’s a bridge. A hidden one. Where else can I find magic?’

‘I’m not going in there. I’ve got a dairy to run!’

‘I don’t want you to come,’ said Rue, beginning to feel irritated at Elizabeth’s bad humour. She might have good reason to be prickly, but that was no help at a time like this. Rue needed to summon up all the optimism she could muster at this moment. If she believed hard enough that all would be well, then it would. It had too.

‘But, Rue, It’s dangerous in there. You can’t just wander off into Faerie, you might never come back!’

Elizabeth was growing wild-eyed with fear and anger and the shock of all that had happened.

‘What else can I do?’ argued Rue. ‘I have to do something. There’s no magic to be had in Highbury. I’ll find the Green Lady and beg for her help. You go home. Take the frog with you and keep him safe till I come back with a cure.’

‘Take it home?’

‘It’s Master Smith, remember? He’s got to be kept safe. I can’t carry a frog and lead a donkey. Promise me you won’t let him out of your sight?’

‘Oh, so be it. I’ll keep him safe.’

‘Promise!’ urged Rue. ‘I’d never forgive myself if he were to get lost. Anything could happen to a frog!’

‘All right, I promise.’

‘Night and day! You have to keep him with you every minute!’

‘All right, I said I promise!’

‘And don’t tell no one about him!’

‘All right! I will keep him a secret and not let him out of sight.’

‘They like flies,’ Rue said.

‘Flies?’

‘To eat. Don’t forget to feed him.’

‘I’m not feeding him flies!’

‘Oh, whatever!’ Rue’s patience was wearing thin. Her head and her bruises ached. ‘I’m off.’ She took hold of the donkey’s lead, but it flinched away from her and made a noise of protest.

‘Sorry, Jack. I mean, Ben. I’ll take your halter off, but would you mind carrying the packs? I don’t know how long we’ll be gone.’ She checked Master Smith’s packs, and was glad to see that there were lots of useful items in them, such as a traveller would carry: baked biscuits, dried fruit, tinderbox, blanket and clothes.

She turned to the wide-eyed man, who looked like Ben Larkins, but was really Jack the donkey. ‘What am I going to do with you? I can’t leave you here, they’ll lock you up in an asylum or something when you start braying at them. You’ll have to come too.’ She looked at the halter and lead in her hands and wondered how she would get it round him.

Jack-who-looked-like-Ben Larkins stared at her, wild-eyed and stomping the ground. Then he dropped on all fours. ‘Can you not walk on two feet, Ben, I mean, Jack? You’ll ruin your hands. Come on, let me help you up – hey, don’t kick! I’ve had enough abuse for one day!’

‘What about the little cart?’ Elizabeth suggested, nodding at the contraption in the stable.

‘Would you mind, Ben?’ Rue asked, picking up the harness again. ‘It’s the only way.’

Elizabeth went with Rue to the fae bridge at the riverbank. It was strangely quiet at that part of the river; usually the water mill would be making its music of clunks and clacks, but the miller had abandoned it, saying he wouldn’t work with goblins trying to get into his mill every night.

The little cart rolled and creaked over the slushy ground. Ben, who was really Jack, sat in the back, while Jack the donkey, who was really Ben Larkins, pulled the cart with much grumbling in his donkey-ish voice, and Rue, tired and bruised before she had even begun her long venture, trudged at the head of this strange party.

The morning was advancing, and the bridge should have sunk back into invisibility after the hour of dawn, but the fresh release of unsanctioned magic had opened it further. It was of an eerie, misty substance, hanging over the wintry river like a ghost.

‘Are you sure it’s a real bridge?’ said Elizabeth, staring at the fast-flowing river.

‘I can just make it out,’ said Rue. ‘But you have to look at it kind of out of the corner of your eye. It’s a different kind of seeing.’

‘If you say so,’ said Elizabeth. ‘But you wouldn’t get me to step into thin air over a river.’

‘Good thing you’re not coming, then.’ Rue felt irritated again by Elizabeth’s lack of encouragement. ‘Don’t speak of this to anyone,’ she said in parting. ‘Not even your ma and your brother and all. Don’t tell no one about the frog and donkey. Only tell Myrtle and Harriet where I’ve gone. And tell them I’m right sorry about the wand and everything, though that pesky dragon didn’t help. I hope to be back before Ben is hardly missed.’

‘How will you manage that?’

‘Time’s different in Faerie. It might feel like weeks there and be only an hour here.’

‘I thought it was the other way round?’ But Rue was too busy herding Ben to pay attention.

‘Oh Rue!’ said Elizabeth, looking stricken. ‘Be safe! And come back with poor Ben back to normal!’

‘Don’t worry,’ Rue called back, as the cart rumbled onto the spectral bridge. She had to tug Ben hard to coax him to step onto it. It was a good thing she’d grown up herding bullocks on the farm. ‘All will be well!’ The feeling of adventure was stirring in her despite everything. It would be well. It had to be. It would be, wouldn’t it...?



Elizabeth thought about what she would say to poor Harriet for the umpteenth time. Her father had insisted she take the carriage to the school, the roads being dirty with slushy snow. She would have preferred to walk; exercise would have helped in dispelling some of the troubled feelings she was carrying. What would poor Harriet say? How could Master Elftyn have behaved so unaccountably? Insufferable man!

'Is Harriet well enough for a visit?' Emma asked at the door, on reaching the school. Part of her hoped that she would hear that Harriet was fast asleep, and must not be disturbed, and part of her wished to get the horrible business over with, but the brownie who answered the door only opened it wide enough to let her in.

'Excellent,' said Emma half-heartedly, stepping round the great silver tabby cat sitting guard in the hallway. She paused before the carving of the Green Lady, feeling it would be rude to pass by without a polite nod.

The carving was barely a quarter of the size of the Green Man at Hartfield, and the Green Lady was not in the habit of showing herself, but she kept an eye over things at the school. Just now she looked very grave.

'Library,' said the brownie in her low, growly voice.

'Library?' Emma repeated. Whatever would Harriet be doing in the library? She must be feeling better to be out of bed and studying.

'I know the way,' she assured the brownie, and walked on with a mounting feeling of dread.

'Oh, Mistress Woodhouse!' cried Harriet, flushing at the sight of Emma coming in. The colour in her cheeks made her look a good deal better. 'I did not expect you to come in such weather.'

'I was anxious to see how you were, dear. What are you doing in here?'

'Myrtle asked me to look for some books on practical things.'

'Practical things?'

'Such as how to mend roof tiles in a barn. We've had some problems.'

'I see.' Emma did not see, but she was not really concerned with books and roof tiles, she was only concerned with breaking her unpleasant news to poor Harriet as gently as possible. She perched on the chair opposite her, forgetting to remove her hat or gloves in her distraction.

'Oh, the Midwinter feast!' Harriet exclaimed. 'You did recall what I said? About eating and drinking?'

'I did,' said Emma gently. 'And I have some news to relate from that evening. News that I am afraid will be painful to you, dear.'

'I'm sure there is nothing that you can say that will be painful to me, Mistress Woodhouse.'

Emma winced at such childlike trust when she was about to wound it so horribly.

'Harriet, dear, sometimes it happens that people we thought we knew very well, we find that we have misunderstood them all along. Sometimes things look one way, when in reality, they are, you know, quite another. Do you understand?'

Harriet tilted her head. 'Do you mean like when I first met Master Martin, and I thought him very plain, but then after a time, he seemed to not be so very plain as I thought he was?'

'Something like that. It would seem that Master Elftyn is likewise not quite how I perceived him to be.'

'Oh. Do you think him not so handsome now?' Harriet looked so innocent, so trusting. Emma felt as though she were about to pinch a little child and take her toy away. She leaned forward from her chair and took hold of Harriet's small hands. 'Harriet, dear, you must be very brave. I regret with all my heart to tell you I have been thoroughly mistaken in Master Elftyn, horribly mistaken in discerning his feelings, or rather in my understanding of the direction of his feelings, for... oh, this is painful to relate, Harriet... for on Midwinter Eve, as we were driving home in the carriage from Randalls, Master Elftyn made... he spoke... that is to say... Master Elftyn declared himself and proposed marriage! There I have said it.'

Emma threw herself back against her chair, relieved to have unburdened her unhappy load.

Harriet looked strangely calm. 'Well, I think it's for the best,' was her surprising reply. Emma stared at her in amazement. 'I agree with you, Mistress Woodhouse. Master Elftyn is not quite the man I thought him either, and I think him not half good enough for you, even if he is so very handsome, why he is not even a millionth part good enough for you. You deserve a better match.'

'Me? A better match! But, Harriet, I had thought Master Elftyn the perfect match for you!' Emma stared at her friend in astonishment. 'I thought you liked him. Was I deceived?'

Harriet blushed more deeply and dropped her head as though she were ashamed of something. 'We have both been deceived in Master Elftyn, I think. And there are a lot of things I am very sorry for and confused about at present.'

'I see,' said Emma, though she did not. But Harriet looked rather miserable at that moment, so she did not press her any further; she was only relieved not to have the terrible outpouring of grief and disappointment she had expected.

'How was it you knew without my telling you I had rejected the proposal?' said Emma, feeling that there was something going on beneath the surface of things that she had not quite got a grasp off. 'But of course,' she continued, answering her own question. 'You know full well that I would never consider him.'

'And even if he had given you a strong love potion, you would have broken the match off once the spell had faded,' said Harriet.

'Love potion?' Had Harriet's late illness addled her brain?

'I was speculating,' said Harriet, blushing again. 'Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, I have been such a fool. It does not surprise me at all that Master Elftyn would wish to marry you, for you are the most beautiful and cleverest lady in all of Highbury – and had he been worthy of you, I should have been very glad to see you accept him.'

'I confess I am astonished, Harriet. Things are not as I thought they were. But then, nothing seems to be as it ought to be in Highbury at present.'

'No, to be sure they are not.' Harriet was quiet for a minute, as though thinking. Then she said, 'It will be awkward seeing *him* about Highbury, will it not?'

'That is something we do not have to contend with, thankfully,' said Emma. 'For he wrote to Papa this morning to say that he was going away.'

'Forever?'

'No, for a visit with friends, but a long one. I confess I'm glad not to have to see him for a good while. But I had feared such news would upset you.'

Harriet only sighed. 'Shall I ask Busie to bring us tea?' she said. 'Though I think Rue ate all the gingerbread.'

'Tea may be a good idea,' agreed Emma, taking off her gloves.

But the sound of someone hammering on the front door of the school interrupted all thoughts of tea. A few moments later, Elizabeth Martin came running into the library, looking wild and strange.

'There you are!' she cried, panting to catch her breath. She was cupping something between her hands.

'Upon my word!' exclaimed Harriet at the strange sight of Elizabeth Martin in such a state. 'What has happened?'

'Something very dreadful,' gasped Elizabeth Martin.

'Is it Master Martin?' Harriet's voice trembled.

'No, not my brother – it's Rue. She's gone over the bridge into Faerie.'

'Over the bridge!' cried Emma. 'What would make anyone do so mad a thing?'

‘I can hardly say,’ stammered Elizabeth Martin. ‘But I’m worried for her and I don’t know what’s to be done! But I must go home directly!’

And Elizabeth Martin ran out as unaccountably as she had arrived.

Harriet and Emma stared at one another.

‘Master Knightley,’ said Emma. ‘He will know what’s to be done.’

INTO A SCRAPE

‘Thank you for coming,’ Emma said, when Master Knightley reached her. Her note had told him she would wait beyond the elm walk; her father could not see that part of the grounds from any window.

‘What’s happened?’ he said, casting a thorough look over her, as though checking for any harm. ‘You said to come immediately.’

She cast a thorough look over him in return. He looked different. She could not say why, but there was a new air about him. For a moment she focused her senses upon him to try to discern what it was – it was *danger*.

‘One of the Godmother students has gone into Faerie this morning. She passed over the bridge.’

‘What! Why would she do such a thing?’

‘I don’t know. No one saw her go, save a local girl, one of the Martins. What can be done to recover her?’

‘I fear nothing can be done,’ he said, running a hand over his face, a gesture he only made when he was very tired or very vexed. Emma caught hold of his hand and looked at his palm.

‘What is this? Master Knightley, what have you been doing?’

His palm was blistered and sore.

‘Nothing of any consequence.’ He withdrew his hand. ‘I’ve grown soft, is all.’

‘Soft?’

‘I’ve lived the retiring life of a gentleman farmer, unlike my ancestors. Now that I’ve taken up the family arms, my sword arm needs training.’ He gave a rueful smile.

‘Family arms? Sword? Have you been wielding the family sword? I hope it is only in practise?’

‘My dear Emma, have you not been listening to anything I have been telling you these past weeks? The darkling bridge has been strengthening day by day. At first it could only be seen at twilight, but as the days have gone by, the minutes have lengthened.’

‘I did not realise it was quite so bad. Have you...’ she did not like to use the word *killed*. ‘Have you caught anything?’

‘I’ve seen off a few goblins and two trolls.’

‘Trolls!’

‘The smaller creatures can get past me more easily. The hobgoblins and the imps. A few have been the source of much of the mischief in the village.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me of this?’ Emma felt a mixture of shame and indignation rising. To think he should be quietly defending the village with no one knowing of it, wielding the ancient sword till his hands were raw. No wonder he looked tired and *dangerous*.

‘Why have you not told Papa of all this?’

Master Knightley only looked at her, as though an answer to such a question was unnecessary, and indeed it was. Emma sighed and answered it herself. ‘It is because he will not do anything about it. But if he knew you had seen off two trolls!’

‘If he knew I had seen off two trolls, he would put you in the tower, Emma, and be in too much agitation to do anything else.’

Emma winced at this truthful picture. ‘This is all worse than I thought. How can the bridge be closed again?’

‘By doing what the Green Man ordered. By bringing the thief of the stolen magic before him to be judged.’

‘Yet, no one knows who the thief is. And what is to be done to recover the Godmother student? She is barely eighteen. It is a dreadful fate for her to fall into Faerie. What if she falls into the way of a troll, or the witch?’

Master Knightley looked grim. ‘If she makes it to the Green Lady’s lands, she will encounter dangers, but they will not be of trolls and the witch. There are still guardian creatures, even in the depths of the woods, loyal to the Court and honour-bound to help mortals passing through. At least, there used to be. Who knows what changes the passage of a century has wrought? Perhaps she has good reason to go. Perhaps she is seeking help.’

‘The Green Lady is a patroness of Godmothers,’ said Emma. ‘She is likely seeking aid from her.’ She thought of the grave face of the Green Lady’s carving. Small wonder she had looked displeased. ‘She is a very courageous young woman, if that is what she has gone into Faerie for.’

‘Very courageous or very foolish, it is one or the other.’ Master Knightley paused, and his voice altered to a quieter tone. ‘Emma, I am not doing my duty in not informing your father of what threat is over Highbury. I am obliged to tell him. I have held off from doing so for the reasons already mentioned.’

Emma looked steadily back at him. ‘I fear it would make him very ill if he knew. And I cannot bear to be locked in the tower again.’

Master Knightley looked away. He would not press her any further. ‘I must consider what to do next,’ he said. ‘My time is increasingly consumed with watching the border so the village can maintain a semblance of normal life. Who knows what or who will come across it next.’

‘I will visit every house in Highbury,’ Emma said determinedly. ‘And try to find some clue, or sense of magic. I will even visit such people as the Coxes. Or perhaps I will send Harriet to them...’



M from her errands about the village to find the dragon gone from the barn. It took some time, but finally she found him lying submerged in the mill pool, blowing bubbles through his nose.

She almost passed the pool by. She had been tracking him by the intermittent trails of footprints in the snowy ground, and they had led her to the river, but his dark blue body was almost invisible in the wintry-dark water.

A water nixie scowled up at her from the bank. ‘Is that your margool?’ she said in her watery, twining voice.

Myrtle was taken aback to see a nixie; they were very rare. So rare, it was believed there were no nixies this side of the border. But she had no time to marvel.

‘A margool?’ She followed the direction of the nixie’s ribbony finger, spying the bubble breaking the surface; bubbles holding little puffs of blue within them that dissolved into the air as the bubbles popped.

Myrtle was about to lean over the bank to see more closely what lay beneath the water, when she caught herself just in time, and drew back. To bend close to the water in the presence of a nixie was a very foolish thing to do. In one fell swoop they could wrap those reed-like arms around your neck and pull you under, and there you would live for seven years at the bottom of the river, or so the books said.

‘What’s a margool?’ Myrtle asked, taking care to keep her senses alert for any beguile-laden answer, such as *bend closer to the water and see*.

But the nixie only tossed her long, green hair in disdain at such mortal ignorance. ‘Get it out of my pool,’ she demanded, ‘before it spoils the taste.’

Myrtle looked about and soon saw what she wanted. She took up a stout stick and tossed it into the pool. At first the stick only lay upon the surface before sinking a little. There was a pause in the bubbles, then a swoosh of water rushed up the bank as a dark blue head on a long neck appeared, snatched up the stick and crunched it up in a few bites.

Myrtle took another stick, calling out, ‘Come and fetch!’ And threw it on the bank. Another swoosh of water, and the dragon leapt out, pouncing with a squeal, while Myrtle pounced on the silvery chain trailing from its neck, and held on tight.

‘Come on, you troublesome creature. I hope you haven’t been up to any mischief?’



R into the woods before she ran into problems. She had found herself a stout faerie-rowan stick which proved very useful in warding off mischievous creatures. She saw their eyes glowing in the branches above and in the surrounding undergrowth. She saw them peeking out from tree holes and roots. The rowan wood hummed softly in her hand, sending out unseen energy which the darklings disliked. But just a glimpse of a goblin, who thought it would be good sport to pop up from behind a bush and pull a face, was enough to send Ben braying in terror, rearing so hard that he broke free of the cart and galloped off in the direction of the bridge back to Donwell and Highbury.

‘Ben, come back! It’s only a pesky goblin!’ But it was no use. He was gone. She followed him all the way back to the bank of the river to see him tearing away towards Hartfield. She marvelled that he had the courage to cross the near-invisible bridge; the magic upon him must have enabled him to see it.

She could either go after him, or carry on in search of the Green Lady who had the power to undo the stray spells. Jack-who-looked-like-Ben Larkins remained secured to the cart. He had not seen the goblin, his human eyes not attuned to the gloom. Rue regarded the donkey in Ben’s body, her hands on her hips. ‘Tripe and Tatties,’ she muttered with a little stamp of her foot. ‘He’s taken the saddlebags with him. Now what will we do? And how am I to get along without him to pull the cart? I can’t go back. I must sort out this mess. You’ll just have to learn to walk, Jack,’ and she untied the straps securing him to his makeshift stall.

She marched on till almost nightfall, pulling the donkey in Ben Larkins’ body behind her. Her chief concern was what she would eat and drink. It was not safe to eat anything out of faerie without payment, and what did she have to pay for it?

She recalled the map of Faerie she'd seen in the library, wishing she had paid it closer attention. She did remember that the Green Lady's lands began on the other side of the Rushy Brook. If she could just cross over before it grew dark, she could eat from the Green Lady's lands, though she may well exact a price from her for the privilege. But no matter what, she must not eat or drink on this side of the brook where the darklings grew things. And she must not be found on this side of the brook after sunset, for fear of trolls and other nocturnal creatures. So, she trudged on, with all her efforts concentrated on this one goal – reach the brook and cross it into safety, ignore all rumblings of the belly, ignore the horrible thirst that made those glistening berries, winking at her from the undergrowth, so desirable. Ignore the ache in her shoulders and arms as she had to keep dragging the skittish donkey, in a lanky, six-foot-man's body, along. It was a good thing she'd dealt with recalcitrant bulls at the family farm often enough. There was a fine line between coaxing and demanding that had to be negotiated with getting a heavy, fearful animal to do what you wished.

Once or twice Rue thought she saw a tall figure between the trees, a hulking figure, shaggy in outline. It seemed to observe her progress at a distance, which was rather unsettling. She thought of turning back more than once – this adventuring business was not so exciting as it was uncomfortable – but one look at Ben's mulish expression and her resolve to go on was strengthened. She had put Ben and Master Smith in a right old pickle, and she must do all she could to get them out of it. So she ignored the moving shape that stalked her steps and kept going while the light dulled and the gloom deepened, as the short day reached its end.

At last the brook was in sight. Rue had never been so glad to see anything. She'd heard the whispering long before she saw the silvery flow of water. And someone had kindly placed stepping stones across it. 'Come on, Jack, you can eat grass and drink water to your heart's content once we get over.'

But Jack did not reply. He had dropped to all fours again when she'd dropped his leash to examine the depth of the bank, and through the shadow of the falling night Rue could just make out his outline.

'Jack? What are you doing? I hope you're not *eating*?' She grabbed Jack's curly head and brought her face close to his to see in the dusk. A stalk of grass and a king-buttercup head was sticking out his mouth.

'No!' she pulled out the flower and grass and tried to force open his jaw. 'Spit it out, Jack, right now!'

Jack swallowed.

'Quick, let's go, before someone—'

A sharp crack of a branch, a rustle of leaves. Someone was close by. A huffing, grunting noise, gruff and low, like a man's, but Rue could not discern if it was mortal or fae.

She peered through the foliage, but could see no one. She tugged Jack along, wrapping his leash tightly about her left forearm to keep him bound to her. At least the gruff, male voice was not that of the old witch of the woods. What could be worse than running into her, other than a pack of trolls?

She took a firm grip of her rowan stick, with her right hand, edged towards the brook, just a few more yards to reach the stepping stones and cross over the whispery, silvery water. She heard the rushing, flowing words of the brook now that all her senses were taut with concentration.

Beware–beware–beware, the water whispered. If she could just get to the first stone, she would be over the border and into the Green Lady's land. Just a few more steps. 'Come on, Jack, do as you're bid, you great lummo.'

She'd almost gained the bank when a bulky figure emerged from behind a tree. Rue raised her staff, ready to strike, but the thing took hold of Jack's legs and dragged him shrieking with terror along the ground, with Rue dragged after him by the leash about her arm.

'Let go!' Rue yelled, scrabbling backwards to try to pull in the opposite direction, but whoever had hold of Jack was strong, strong as an ox, and now that it was pulling her closer to it, she could add – strong as a bear – '*A bear! Oh, no!*'

ADVENTURING TOO FAR

It frustrated Myrtle that she could not go immediately into Faerie, but it would be unwise to travel at this hour of the day. She would have no chance of reaching safety before dark fell. She would leave at first light.

Ever since Master Knightley had spoken with her, here in the library, she'd been watching the bridge, and had seen its patterns of opening in the gloaming. She could also see that the bridge was still there beyond those hours, but only those with fae sight, or trained senses, would discern it. She knew she could cross it in the minutes before sunrise.

She had also seen how Master Knightley patrolled the area at such hours with his sword drawn, flashing dangerously. It might not be easy to get past him.

She studied the map again, wanting to memorise everything on it.

The Green Lady's palace lay to the west. If she crossed the Rushy Brook she would be in the Green Lady's lands, and could travel to find her, and, more importantly, find Rue.

'Are you really going?' Harriet asked tremulously, coming into the library bearing a plate of food.

'I can't leave Rue alone,' said Myrtle, frowning over the map. 'I'm vexed she didn't tell us anything, it's so odd her just taking off like that. Was it because of the wand being eaten? Or perhaps she was lured.'

'She does do things on impulse,' Harriet said.

All Myrtle had been able to extract from Elizabeth Martin was some garbled account of an accident with a donkey and a wand getting eaten by a dragon, and Rue running off to find more magic from the Green Lady.

Mistress Martin had said that Elizabeth was in shock, and Sister Myrtle must come back and talk to her another day when she was well, but Myrtle would not wait another day before going after Rue.

'Do eat,' Harriet urged, putting the plate down on the table. 'You'll need to keep your strength up for the journey.'

Myrtle sniffed as the pleasing smell of Busie's stew reached her nose.

'Do you think the Green Lady will help?' Harriet asked. 'Or will she be angry?' Sometimes the carved face of the Green Lady looked pleasant and kindly and made one think of springtime and May flowers and all things lovely. But other times, she looked queenly and severe, as well she might, for was she not the May queen, the consort of the Green Man? Only the Faerie queen herself ranked higher.

'I shall soon find out,' said Myrtle, succumbing to the aroma of the food, and spooning up a mouthful. 'I only hope I can catch Rue up on the way.'

Harriet picked up one of the open books that covered the library table.

'*The Ways of Fae: A Practical Guide for Mortals*,' she read aloud.

‘The Fae are very fond of riddles. You will always ensure engagement with them, even darkling folk, should you compose a riddle or conundrum. But do not make it easy to guess, or they will consider you unworthy. A good riddle earns respect. I’ve had trouble enough with riddles,’ Harriet murmured. She turned the page.

‘Never accept hospitality from a fae personage without first giving a gift or you may find a high price exacted for your victuals.’

She turned to Myrtle. ‘What will you do about food? You must take something to use as payment.’

‘I shall take as much food as I can carry. I’m more concerned about the dragon. It eats so much.’

‘You can’t leave it here!’ said Harriet in alarm. ‘I hope you tied it up properly, or it might escape again.’

‘I tied it up securely,’ Myrtle promised. ‘And of course I’m not leaving it behind. I hope to find where it comes from and take it home.’

‘That would be a good idea. Oh, if only it hadn’t eaten the wand.’

Myrtle sighed and put her spoon down. ‘If only it hadn’t eaten the wand,’ she agreed.

Harriet resumed her reading.

‘Do not enter a fairy ring, even if invited. If tempted to join, recall that you will not know the passing of time while you are engaged in the merriment of the dance, it may be many days or years later when you are released, though it feels but an hour.’

‘It’s a good thing you’re not one to be tempted by dancing,’ noted Harriet. ‘I might find it a temptation, but I am not going into Faerie. Oh, Myrtle, ought I to come with you? It seems cowardly of me to stay here while you and Rue go into such danger.’

‘Someone needs to be here in case Mother Goodword returns,’ said Myrtle. ‘We can’t abandon the school entirely in her absence. You must keep looking for the wand thief.’

‘And Mother Goodword charged me not to neglect her plants and their sprites,’ Harriet said. ‘But I feel as though I’m not being a real Godmother Sister in letting you and Rue go alone.’

‘Harriet, we’ve argued this point already. It will be bad enough watching out for the dragon, I don’t need to be slowed down by you getting scared of every little imp.’

Harriet looked hurt, and Myrtle wished she hadn’t spoken so bluntly. ‘Harriet, I need you to do something very important to help me. I cannot go after Rue unless you do it.’

‘What is that? Pack your food supplies, I suppose.’

‘Far more important. I need you to distract Master Knightley away from the bridge so I can get across without him seeing me.’

Harriet looked as worried as if she had been asked to distract a horde of imps. But she straightened her shoulders and said. ‘Very well. I will do it.’



‘P gasped out Rue, as she was taken hold of by the collar of her cloak and dragged unceremoniously into the trees. The Bear held Jack fast on the other side. ‘We must be on our way!’

The Bear grunted something indistinct, his voice caused Rue to shiver, and Jack to bray.

The Bear stopped at this noise. He peered closely at Jack. ‘*What...are... you?*’ he said in halting, growling speech.

A thought struck Rue.

‘He’s a riddle,’ she said, her voice distorted by the tightness around her neck. The Bear’s grip was powerful and having such enormous black claws so close to one’s face was alarming.

‘*Rid-dle?*’ The Bear’s grip relaxed a degree.

‘If you cannot solve him, then set us free.’ Rue did her utmost to inject a jovial tone into her voice.

But the Bear only grunted and dragged them onwards.

‘Where are you taking us?’ she cried.

‘*My...den.*’

The den was hidden behind a curtain of ivy, with a flight of steps, cut out of the earth, leading down to it. With every step into the darkness, Rue felt her courage ebbing away. So this was how it would end. Eaten underground by a fae bear. How would it feel to have one’s bones crunched up? Her stomach did a little somersault. Would she have to watch poor Jack being eaten first? ‘*Merciful Mushrooms,*’ she whimpered as a rough paw thrust her into darkness.

‘*Sit,*’ ordered the Bear, and light appeared. Lanterns full of darting fireflies sprang into life, and a fire flamed up in a grate. As Rue’s eyes adjusted to the space, she was surprised to find herself in a pleasant room with beamed ceilings and clean rush matting on the floor. Massive wooden furniture, big enough for a bear, populated the room, and was that... ‘a teapot?’ marvelled Rue, watching the Bear hang a pan of water onto a hook over the fire. The Bear handled the enormous teapot with care, as though it were precious, despite the chip in the spout and the crack in the handle. He held it out to her. ‘*Tea.*’

‘You want me to make you tea?’ So, she would be kept as a slave rather than be eaten immediately. But the Bear was placing three cups and saucers on a table. One large, one medium-sized, and one small. The smallest cup was twice the size of Mother Goodword’s teacups. They were all to have tea. This was interesting. Next came three bowls of differing sizes and a sack of groats was lifted from a wooden bin. Rue was to make porridge and tea. Perhaps the Bear liked to fatten up his victims first.

‘I think Jack would prefer his oats uncooked,’ Rue suggested as she set to work. Cooking was not her strong point, but she would do her best.

It was the strangest supper she had ever had, and she wondered what high price would be exacted for the eating of it. But when a great black bear with great black claws orders you to eat, one eats, even if there were no spoons and eating was quite a messy experience. Fortunately, Rue had put too much water in the porridge and it slipped down like gruel. The Bear banged his bowl down when he was done and said, ‘*Thin.*’

‘I know,’ agreed Rue. ‘Sorry. Bit runny, weren’t it? But the tea were good!’

The tea had been very good. Rue could not discern the full blend of leaves. She’d tasted spearmint and dandelion and rose-hip, but what the other herbs were, she could not say. They were not to be found over the border. The honey added to the tea and porridge was the best honey she’d ever had. ‘What do your bees feed on to make such good honey?’ she asked.

‘*Star-bright,*’ said the Bear. The words sounding long and sonorous in his deep growl.

‘Starbright. Never heard of it. Must be native to Faerie.’ If she could take home a little root of starbright to plant up and grow for her bees, she might be able to make this wonderful honey. But such a happy thought suddenly made her sad. Home. Her bees. Her family and friends. She might not ever see them again, not if she were to be a slave to a Bear. The porridge turned heavy in her stomach and she put her bowl down.

‘*Rid-dle*,’ said the Bear, pointing at Jack who had refused to sit on the chair he’d been directed to. He’d slid to the floor to eat his groats and was now stretched out with his arms and legs stuck out at right angles to his body. His ears flicked back and forth now and then, and his bottom twitched occasionally, as though he felt as though he ought to have a tail, but otherwise he looked rather relaxed. The poor fellow didn’t realise the peril he was in.

‘Riddle?’ repeated Rue, thinking that the Bear mistook Jack’s name. ‘His name is Jack. Though, the body he’s in is Ben. It’s complicated.’

‘*Tell...me...rid-dle*.’ The bear pulled out a large wooden pipe and a box of leaves that glittered a little. Rue watched in surprise as he filled his pipe and lit it, sitting down in his enormous wooden chair and puffing contentedly. It was a very pleasant smell; not one she was familiar with. This was turning out to be a very surprising bear. Almost civilised. And now he wanted her to tell him riddles to while away the evening. Well, she could do that.

‘I will tell you riddles in return for supper,’ she said, glad to have thought of something to trade for her food. The Bear drew on his pipe and settled back, so she took that as an assent and cast her mind back to Harriet’s book of Rhymes and Riddles. She ought to remember some of them, she had heard Harriet read them often enough.

She would begin with an easy one, to see how good the Bear was.

‘If you have me, you want to share me. If you share me, you do not have me.’

‘*Se-cret*.’

He was good. She would have to try harder.

‘The more you take, the more you leave behind.’

‘*Foot-steps*.’

‘What belongs to you, but other people use it more than you?’

‘*Your... name*.’

He was very good. Too good. She had no hope of besting him, but at least he was enjoying himself, judging by his contented smoke rings. And a contented bear was not a bone-crunching bear.

‘I can tell stories too,’ she offered. ‘Shall I tell you the story of Orfeosus and the Silver Dragon?’

The Bear nodded agreeably. Rue was relieved. She could not keep up with riddles all night, but she could spin a story for as long as required. ‘I’ll need more tea,’ she said, beginning to feel relaxed enough herself to pour another cup. ‘Talking makes the mouth dry.’ The bear puffed, Jack snored. Rue sipped and then began.

‘Once upon a time...’

W she was lying in a bed. A proper bed of carved wood and fur covers. She could not say if it was morning, for it was shadowy and dim, except for the lantern and firelight glimmering in the next room. Then she remembered all that had happened the night before, the bear, Jack, *Jack*! Where was he? Had he been eaten for breakfast? She leaped up and ran into the sitting room. The bear was stirring the pot over the fire. More porridge. That was some comfort. He hadn’t had

donkey-disguised-as-human for breakfast then. And there was Jack, eating groats from a bowl on the floor.

‘*Tea*,’ ordered the Bear, pointing at the teapot. Rue got to work.

Rue ate her own bowl of porridge in a mix of confusion and curiosity. What would happen to them? Would she be kept down here out of the sunlight to make tea and tell stories forever? She hated being confined, hated it more than anything. But when breakfast was over, the Bear beckoned them to follow him out of the room and up the dark stairs.

Rue blinked in the morning light, though it was not a bright light beneath the dense canopy of trees, and it was very early, barely past dawn. The ground sparkled with dew. She led Jack by his leash, wondering where they were going. The Bear led them back to the brook where he had found them the previous night. Rue stared at him in amazement when she realised he was gesturing for them to cross over the steppingstones and be on their way. In the soft earth of the bank, just before the steppingstones, she could see great six-toed footprints. Troll prints. And not the four-toed woodland trolls, but the great man-eating trolls. Had she attempted to cross the night before, they would have been snatched away to a grisly fate.

She turned to thank the Bear, but he was gone. And now that her fear was dissipated, Rue could smell something bittersweet in his wake. It was powerful, and for a few moments it enveloped her with an overwhelming sorrow. The smell was the distinct scent of loneliness, very like that of wintergreen. The bear had lost someone dear to him.

The bear’s feeling of grief passed as the scent dissipated in the morning air, and now that her own freedom and life had been restored Rue laughed aloud, the exuberance in her voice mingling with the whispers of the brook. ‘I know!’ she replied to the brook, as it whispered her favourite word to her ‘*adventure—adventure—adventure.*’

‘The world is a wonderful adventure,’ agreed Rue, tugging Jack’s lead as he shied away from the water. ‘Come on, you stubborn mule, you can eat as much grass as you like on the other side!’

‘I we’ll be just fine now,’ Rue told Jack as they followed the path through the trees on the other side of the brook. ‘We’ll get out of these woods, and take care not to go near the marshes, and we’ll get into the Green Lady’s meadows, and find her palace and ask her for help. She were a good friend of Lady Stormont’s, you know, so she’s known to be kindly to us Godmothers. Our patroness, you know. But, course you don’t know. You’re a donkey. Oh, I’ve always wanted to see the famous Green Palace, it’s said to be a right rare beauty.’

A pair of birch sprites began playing with Jack, pulling his curls and laughing at the sight of a human wearing a harness. ‘Why is it wherever I go I get plagued by sprites,’ Rue complained, batting away the flitting fairies, who dodged her hand easily. ‘Away with you, you should be ashamed of tormenting a poor old donkey.’

A donkey with curls, laughed one sprite. *A donkey in breeches*, laughed the other.

Rue pressed on.

Berries for dinner. Berries for supper. Rue was fed up with berries, and she was footsore and shoulder sore from keeping Jack in check all day. The sun was setting, and they needed to find shelter, the stretch of open meadows they’d been passing through offering none. A gentle wood was to the east of the fae path. It would not hurt to stray just a little from it to find some shelter among the trees. As long as the

path was still in view, it would hopefully not vanish away as things of Faerie were said to do.

‘Come on, Jack. I’m tired and hungry. Seems it’s farther than I thought to the palace, even by these fae paths. That’s the trouble with maps, they make everything look shorter than it is.’

Jack was subdued with tiredness and made no fuss in following her. The woods were calm, as only a fair-folk wood could be. There was no danger of trolls and goblins here. The sun slipped away, and Rue curled up with her back against Jack’s back, huddling together for warmth. They shared Jack, or rather, Ben’s, rolled up cloak as a pillow. She was just dozing off and slipping into dreams when she heard the music begin: the prettiest, brightest, silvery, tinkling, rhythmic music. She sat up, still feeling sleepy.

‘Hear that, Jack?’ she said softly into the dark.

The sound was irresistible. Her tiredness fled, while the dreaminess increased. She followed the merry tune, her eyes picking out a bright glow through the trees. There, in a glen, was a fairy ring of red-capped toadstools. From within the ring came laughter and the sway and spinning of the fair folk dancing in rings within the ring. It was a sight to behold. Rue felt Jack’s warm breath on her neck as he ambled up behind her.

An elven man, with green eyes and a merry grin, saw Rue and held out a hand. ‘Come, fair maid, and join the dance.’

Rue recalled something she had read about dancing in fairy rings. Something about time, perhaps. Was it that time sped up, or time slowed down? Whatever it was, it did not seem to matter in this moonlit and dreamlike gaiety.

She drifted closer, drawn by the drumbeat that quickened her pulse and told her feet that they were made only to dance. She grinned lazily back at the elf and reached out her hand, which looked large and crude besides the slender fingers of the elf.

As soon as she was pulled into the ring, she felt the shift in time happen. It fled away. The past, the future, they were not to be thought of. Only the present mattered, and the present was so much *fun*!

THE TALKING AUNT

‘If only there were a Wisewoman in Highbury,’ said Emma, standing at the window of her tower, gazing out over the streets and fields below. ‘I would beg of her a handful of wishes.’

Harriet was turning over the pages of her riddle book listlessly, not seeing the pages at all. Her thoughts were full of Myrtle and Rue and what dangers they might be in. It had not been very difficult to distract Master Knightley away from the bridge for a quarter of an hour on the morning that Myrtle left. She had drawn him away with the claim that she had seen darkling footprints further down the river bank, and begged him to come and look. Once he’d examined the prints, declaring them to be nothing more than deer coming to drink at the water’s edge, she had thrown up her hood and watched the memory of their encounter fade from his eyes as the forgetfulness cloak did its work.

‘You’re not listening, Harriet,’ Emma’s clear voice cut through Harriet’s thoughts. ‘For I asked you what you would wish for.’

‘Sorry, Mistress Woodhouse. I was thinking of, you know...’

‘Were you thinking of *him*?’

‘No, to be sure I was not.’

Harriet wished that Mistress Woodhouse would cease from the foolish idea of thinking of Master Elftyn as Harriet’s failed match. Harriet had not the courage to tell Mistress Woodhouse that Harriet considered Master Elftyn’s *her* failed match. It was best to forget all that nonsense which had brought nothing but trouble in its wake.

‘I was thinking of all the troubles.’

‘Are there new troubles?’ Emma asked. ‘It is very bad that your school friends have gone into Faerie. I wish you would tell me all about it. You’re very secretive about things to do with the school.’

‘It is a vow we take,’ said Harriet gravely. ‘A most solemn vow to keep all Godmothering business secret among us.’

‘Which only shows that I am not one of you,’ said Emma.

‘I hope you soon will be. When Mother Goodword returns, and everything is well again. Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, will things ever be well again?’

Harriet flung herself from her chair and stood at the window, peering towards the grim line of woods beyond the river, and wondering if Rue and Myrtle were still beneath the trees, or if they had passed beyond the woods into the Green Lady’s lands. Almost two weeks had passed by, but it could be but two days in Faerie.

‘I cannot imagine what it is *you* could wish for that you do not already have,’ Harriet said.

‘Oh, I wish nothing for myself. I only wish for the same things as you. I wish things to be well in Highbury again, as they used to be. I wish that poor Benjamin

Larkins would return home, Master Knightley says his parents are distraught. I hope nothing terrible has befallen him in Faerie, if he has gone astray there. I hope he wasn't dragged in by some foul creature.'

Harriet did not know the details of the disappearance of Benjamin Larkins, but she had her suspicions that it was something to do with Rue, but she could say nothing of this to Mistress Woodhouse. She wished she could pluck up the courage to call on Elizabeth Martin and find out more of what had happened the day Rue disappeared, but the thought of seeing Master Martin, who she had not seen since his proposal, kept her away.

'It's been more than a fortnight since they left,' said Harriet sadly.

'I wonder that Mother Goodword does not return to unravel this sad tangle of misfortune. Two of her senior students missing, a young man gone nobody knows where, or to what fate. Meanwhile, Mistress Weston is very disappointed that Master Weston's son has not come to visit as was hoped, and her new housemaid is distracted beyond usefulness, which would infer that the rumours regarding her and poor Benjamin Larkins are true. The weather is erratic, and half the animals in the vicinity are going wild. I suspect Master Knightley does not tell me a tenth part of what he does as he ranges up and down the river bank every evening with his sword, for fear I should take fright at what he has seen and done. It can only be a matter of time before my father is alerted to the danger. I would wish everything well again, if I could.'

'Indeed,' said Harriet quietly.

'We must cheer ourselves a little, or we shall be no use to anyone,' said Emma, with an exertion of spirits. 'Let's put on our cloaks and take a walk into the village while it is dry. We will look around the market, even if it is a poor show these days. Another thing I should like to wish away. Come along, dear. There is little point us practising sensing this morning when I am so pettish, and I have had enough of riddles for some time to come.'

Harriet looked hesitant, so Emma added, 'We shall be sure to look for clues while we're out. Who is next on the list?'

Harriet pulled a lengthy list from her pocket and unfolded it. 'Master Garrett the elder, George Garrett the younger and his wife Betsy, Mistress Goodenough, and Widow Gove the spinner,' she read.

'Are we only up to G?' said Emma. They had written all the names of the villagers alphabetically that they might investigate each one for evidence of having used stolen magic for some weeks past.

'There was a good deal between A and F,' said Harriet. 'And we've done all the G's except these last four.'

'Well, to the Garretts we shall go.'

H despite the market still being out of sorts. The usual gossip was heard at every stall and meeting point. Emma had brought a basket from home, and had distributed the gift of a jar of beetroot relish to Master Garrett, that she and Harriet might gain entry to the house. But there was nothing remarkable to be seen in the Garrett's narrow town house; no evidence of magic-gained wealth.

Widow Gove grumbled that she hated beetroot, but refused to give the jar back. Emma kept her temper and bribed her with the promise of a half-dozen pickled eggs instead, that she and Harriet might gain access to the tiny cottage. But there were certainly no traces of magic to be found there.

They passed down the broadway, nearing the house where lived Dame and Mistress Baytes, when they were called to from the casement window above, and begged to step up.

‘There should be no danger of any letter from the niece, for her letters always come early in the week,’ Emma observed to Harriet as they waited for the maid to answer the door. ‘Or I should not agree to visit today. But we shall be quite safe.’

Old Dame Baytes was knitting diligently by the fire, as usual, and offered her seat to Mistress Woodhouse, who assured her she would be far too warm by the fireside, she would far sooner sit on the settle beside Harriet.

‘Is Mother Goodword home?’ old Dame Baytes asked, peering over her spectacles at Harriet.

‘No, ma’am, she has not yet returned.’

‘Mother is very fond of Mother Goodword,’ said Mistress Baytes. ‘They are old friends. They were at school together, as student and teacher.’

‘Were they indeed?’ Harriet had not known this.

‘My mother would have liked to be a Godmother, is that not so, Mother? You should have liked to be a Godmother and go about helping with charms and herbs and matchmaking and all manner of things that Godmothers do, should you not?’

Old Dame Baytes looked cross and waved her knitting needle at her daughter.

‘My mother does not like to talk of it,’ Mistress Baytes said. ‘It was a great disappointment to her when her father told her she could not study to be a Godmother, but must marry the man he had chosen for her. In my mother’s day, young ladies had to marry where they were told to. My father was a good man. Very proper. A little strict, but then I am sure I was a naughty child. My sister, Jane, she was never naughty, she was quite the angel, and my niece is just like her mama, not only in name but in being so good, quite an angel!’

‘But Mother never forgot her lessons, and she kept her study books, and she likes to look them over and remember happier days. But where are my manners? Oh, I can still be naughty, forgetting my manners, how often would my father say to me, “Hetty, mind your manners or mind my birch!” Though he never used it, he was too kind a father for that.’

Mistress Baytes threw off her remembrances of the past and bustled about, giving out cups of hot cordial and making enquiries about the dryness of their shoes. It was all very tiresome to Emma in part, but there was some odd comfort to be had in everything being as it always was at least in one household of Highbury.

‘How is Master Woodhouse?’ enquired Mistress Baytes as she pressed cake upon them. ‘Mistress Cole has just been and was kind enough to take a piece of cake and to say that she liked it very much. Patty sliced the bottom off it before she brought it up, for the bottoms are always burnt these days, but I shall not grumble, for I am very much obliged to Mistress Wallis for the cake, for she barely charges us a thing for it, she is very good. You will take a piece? Thank you, you are very kind. Mistress Cole thought the currants were nice and plump.’

‘Master Cole has had more trouble with his horses again, we are sure there must be a troublesome hob about teasing the horses at night, and he has taken on a very wild mule, or donkey, it came rushing across the fields from the direction of Donwell a week or two ago, no one knows whose donkey it is, and Master Cole offered to stable it, as he has room, but he says he wishes he had never taken it on, for it is the oddest creature. It spits out its groats and hay and will only eat apples, cheese and bread. Did you ever hear anything like it? Master Cole jokes that the creature would prefer a table laid up with a plate of roast dinner and a cup of beer than a bag of oats, and it does not take well to the harness, so he has hardly been

able to rent it out, though Mistress Cole has ridden it once or twice. Master Cole has said that if the creature will not earn his keep, he shall be turned over to the next man who will give him sixpence for it.

‘Such peculiar goings on in Highbury these days, Mistress Woodhouse, what with poor Master Larkins still looking for his boy, and there have been sightings of roamers and talk of witches and *dragons*! I say that Master Elftyn has the right idea to be going away and enjoying himself at the balls in town away from all this worry. But mustn’t grumble, for I’m sure Master Woodhouse and Master Knightley and Mother Goodword will sort everything out between them. What do you say, Mistress Woodhouse?’

Mistress Woodhouse was at a disadvantage in being unable to say anything at that moment, for she was engaged in chewing a morsel of cake. Thus, Mistress Baytes rushed on as an unchecked stream after heavy rain.

‘Mistress Cole was kind enough to bring a letter that Master Elftyn wrote to Master Cole. What a delightful time Master Elftyn is having. How long it seems since he left, and how many balls and engagements he has had, he has been quite the favourite in town, engaged to dine almost every night of the week, but that is no surprise to his friends in Highbury, is it? For he is sure to be a great favourite wherever he goes. Such a charming man, so very handsome, one does not often see a young man so charming as our Master Elftyn, do you not think? You are very quiet, Mistress Woodhouse, and Sister Harriet. Let me get you another cup of cordial. Patty makes the best elderflower cordial in all the county. Dear Jane always says so. Now where is Patty?’

Mistress Baytes stuck her head around the doorway and called down the stairs for Patty to bring more cordial directly.

‘Patty will bring it directly,’ she assured them. ‘Now what were we talking of?’

‘You were saying that your niece, Jane, admires her grandmother’s cordial,’ said Emma, anxious to divert the talk away from Master Elftyn and his dancing and dining. Emma was aware that she was acting most nobly in encouraging the talk to flow into the great cavernous well of praise that surrounded the subject of Jane Fairfayce. ‘Have you heard from Maid Fairfayce lately? I hope she is well?’

‘Thank you, you are so kind!’ I have a letter. Now where did I put it.’

Emma’s heart sank. She had not expected a letter at this time of the week. Now she would have to listen to every word four times over. She entertained herself with thoughts of her own for a while, as Mistress Baytes rushed on.

Emma smiled and nodded and looked as though she were most interested in all that was said, but inwardly she was thinking that she must tell the housekeeper not to order the cream from the Martins’ dairy again that week, for it had a bluish tinge to it, which had caused Papa a good deal of anxiety. Her thoughts then gravitated from blue cream to the Green Man, as she pondered who the thief was.

She ought to be out visiting more houses, looking for clues, and wondered why she had agreed to this visit, and now her kindness was being repaid with having a letter from Jane Fairfayce thrust upon her.

There was a pause in Emma’s train of thoughts and she heard Mistress Baytes say, ‘Jane speaks so distinct! However, she will not find her grandmama at all deafer than she was two years ago, which is saying a great deal at my mother’s time of life, and it really is full two years, you know, since she was here. We never were so long without seeing her before, and as I was telling Mistress Cole, we shall hardly know how to make enough of her now.’

‘Are you expecting Maid Fairfayce here soon?’ Emma asked.

‘Oh yes; tomorrow. My mother is so delighted, for she is to stay a full three months! And I hope you will be among the first of our friends to call and greet her? I hope you will come back tomorrow, dear Mistress Woodhouse. Do say you will. Jane would be so pleased!’

POISON

‘**S**he is very pretty,’ Harriet observed the following afternoon. She and Emma stepped out of the Baytes’ house and picked their way through the puddles. ‘Beautiful, even.’

‘I always said she was handsome,’ said Emma.

‘Such a delicate complexion. A little pale, but very clear and fine like a little statue, you know, made of glazed china.’

‘A little pale, to be sure.’

‘So tall.’ Harriet sighed. ‘Not too tall, but a pretty height. And such a pretty figure. Not too fat, and not too thin. Perhaps a little too thin. Mistress Martin would say she needed feeding up.’

‘A little too thin. But I hear she has been unwell,’ Emma added magnanimously.

‘What colour would you say her eyes were? Would you say they were blue? It was not easy to tell, for she sat away from the window. I think they were blue.’

‘Grey. I have known her since childhood; she has grey eyes.’

‘A deep grey,’ said Harriet. ‘Like... a wet stone. And such long, dark lashes. But grey is not my favourite eye colour. I think hazel is much prettier.’

Emma smiled at her faithful friend, and agreed that Jane Fairfayce had very good eyelashes, and gave one pleasure to look at. They were quite in agreement that Jane Fairfayce was a charming and handsome young lady.

‘And she speaks so beautifully,’ Harriet continued. ‘Her voice is so soft and clear, like a little bell. She speaks almost as nicely as you do.’

‘She has a pleasant tone, to be sure,’ admitted Emma, ‘but she does not *say* much, which is vexing. I set out this afternoon determined to admire and like Maid Fairfayce, truly I did, but trying to engage her in conversation is so difficult, but it has always been so.

‘To think she has recently met Master Weston’s son, Frank Charmall. Has met him and been of his party on several occasions, I believe she has even danced with him, yet I could not get barely one word from her on the subject. Here we are in Highbury, in the greatest anticipation of meeting the long-lost son, full of interest in him, and she cannot, *will not*, tell me one sensible word about him. Only that he is generally well thought of and considered well looking. But what does that convey?’

Emma’s pace quickened as she spoke, for she had been frustrated in her eagerness to hear of Frank Charmall. Harriet had to skip a little to keep up until Emma resumed her usual pace.

‘If I could choose my own ward,’ said Harriet, ‘I should take great pleasure in matchmaking such an elegant creature as Maid Fairfayce. Not only is she beautiful enough for anyone, but she needs to marry, or she will have to earn her living on her own. Should you not like to match her yourself?’

Emma considered this. She swept her eyes along the street, mentally calculating all the eligible men who lived in the village, but could settle on none as being worthy, and capable of giving the young lady the independence that she desperately needed, for without a husband, poor Jane, with her handsome looks and elegant accomplishments was destined for a sorry future as a governess, for her aunt and grandmother were too poor to keep her.

‘I wish there were someone I could match her with,’ said Emma, feeling that she was being most charitable despite Maid Fairfayce’s reticence to gossip on the things that most interested her. ‘But I cannot think of anyone at present. And I have proved a miserable matchmaker so far. What we need is a rich, handsome young man to come riding into the village and sweep her off her feet.’

‘Oh, that sounds like a delightful romance,’ said Harriet. They continued walking. Harriet’s voice altered to a quieter, more serious one. ‘I was applying my sensing today,’ she admitted. ‘While we were having tea. And I do not know if it is a clue, but I sensed something that surprised me very much.’

‘Do tell, dear.’

‘A secret.’

‘What secret?’

‘I don’t know what the secret is, but I sensed that someone in the room was harbouring a very great secret.’

‘Indeed! Well, this is most interesting,’ said Emma with relish. ‘There is undoubtedly something mysterious in Jane Fairfayce’s sudden reappearance in Highbury after so long an absence. It must be her who has come among us harbouring a secret.’

‘I wonder what it is,’ said Harriet. ‘Could it be anything to do with the thief? It is not likely, is it? And yet I feel I must not rule out anything unusual from being a clue, no matter how small.’

‘I cannot see what connection Jane Fairfayce could have to the theft,’ Emma concluded. ‘She was not here when all the trouble began.’ Her quick mind ranged over the potential options of Jane Fairfayce’s secret. ‘You heard Mistress Baytes talk of a young man of the name of Master Dixon, did you not?’ she said eagerly.

‘The rich young man who has just married Maid Fairfayce’s companion?’

‘The very one. Could there have been an unrequited romance between the young Master Dixon and the beautiful Jane Fairfayce? A forbidden romance, even?’

‘A forbidden romance!’

‘Would it not explain her paleness and lack of appetite her aunt talks of? Would it not perfectly account for her sudden flight from her friends to return home?’

‘Why, to be sure. I suppose it would.’

‘I cannot conceive how any person would choose to live for three entire months in the confined rooms of Mistress Baytes unless it were a matter of desperation. How could anyone endure the constant fuss and chatter of that poor woman from morning till night?’

‘To be sure. She does talk a good deal. But she is very hospitable. Do you really think there is some great, secret love affair?’

‘What I think is that there is something mysterious about this sudden return. But I will say no more. We must practise our sensing upon Maid Fairfayce when next we meet her. Just in case there is more to this secret than a romantic misalliance,’ she added, by way of justifying her curiosity.

Thus Emma’s thoughts ran on like a mischievous will-o-wisp, all the way home.



M were something that Myrtle had to contend with when she gained the Merry Marshes on the border of the Green Lady's lands. At least, she hoped she was still in the Merry Marshes, for the border between the Merry Marsh and the Mischief Marsh was imperceptible.

On the map of Faerie, it had shown up as a fine demarcation, barely a hair's breadth on the page. It was hard to know whether the bobbing lights of the will-o-wisps were supposed to be on her right-hand side, or if they had thrown her off course by their mist, and her right side was now really her left side. Such were the muddling effect of wisps.

She had hoped to avoid the marshes altogether; there was a shortcut to the Silver Woods that bypassed the marshes, but fae paths are tricky things, and will not always appear when you want them, and she had not found the shortcut.

She walked on, picking her way through the marshy ground, paying no heed to the beckoning of the wisps, knowing that they would likely lead her into a deep bog if she did.

The dragon did not like the marshes. There was nothing for him to chase after. Myrtle had put him back on his chain, for fear he would be led astray in the mist.

'It's only a few miles,' she told her disgruntled companion. 'We'll be out of here by noontime.' The dragon puffed red clouds at her. 'I can do without the smoke. It's hard enough to see where I'm going as it is.'

She'd done well until now, she considered. She had been stalked by a great bear in the Wild Woods, but had escaped it by crossing over the Rushy Brook shortly before sunset. Once on the other side she was sure she had glimpsed a troll – an enormous troll, not a small woodland one – but they were safe on the Green Lady's lands by then.

She had remembered that there was a dell with a fairy ring in the woods bordering the meadows, and had resisted the temptation to seek shelter there for fear she would be enticed away into a dance lasting for years. So they had slept as best they could in the open meadows, and carried on at first light. Now she must navigate between the marshes, through the Silver Woods, and then she ought to pick up the Green Byway that would lead her all the way to the Green Palace. If she could just keep to the invisible border of the Merry Marshes, she would be just fine, but she feared that something had gone awry.

N judging by the hunger pangs that told Myrtle it was her usual hour for eating. She had walked for hours, and the dragon was getting irritable, wanting food, but there was nothing but marsh eels and swamp toads to be caught at present, and Myrtle knew all about the poisonous effects of swamp toads. Unfortunately, the dragon did not. Myrtle felt a tugging on the chain and turned to see what the resistance was due to.

'What are you eating?' she cried, seeing the dragon pluck something from behind a patch of reeds and cram it between his sharp teeth. 'Drop it, this instant!' She rushed to him, glimpsing a yellow-spotted leg – *two* pairs of spotted legs – before they were swallowed up. 'No! You can't eat swamp toads – they're poisonous!'

The dragon looked at her and belched a vile-smelling yellow puff.

Myrtle ducked down and covered her face with her cloak to avoid breathing in the poison. It had been a good reaction, for the puff of noxious smoke landed on a patch of marsh weed, and the leaves shrivelled up into blackness and died. 'Oh, my!' said Myrtle, staring at the dire patch of ground. She tugged the dragon

onwards, taking care to keep out of the reach of any belches. What would she would do should if should get sick? And sicken he surely would. She had read that it only took the extracted poison of one swamp toad to kill a grown man, surely two toads could seriously harm a dragon less than half the size of a man? This was dreadful. A nightmare. She was walking in circles in the Mischief Marshes and her dragon might drop dead on her before the day was over.

‘Merciful Mushrooms,’ Myrtle groaned, ‘what am I to do?’ A thought struck her. ‘I need merciful mushrooms! I have to get into the Silver Woods and find them before nightfall.’ She looked back at the dragon who followed behind her, not showing any signs of poisoning. But he would. She knew that he would. But how to get out of these wretched marshes and into the fair woods beyond?

She trudged on, feeling that time was running out, which was almost laughable, for time was very different in Faerie than it was at home. For all she knew, she’d been walking for days, but it was no use pondering the nature of time; she had to find a way out of this wretched marsh, and quickly. Was she imagining things, or did the dragon look a little stooped, as though he were weary? Were his scales looking duller? Were his puffs of smoke fainter? Weaker?

Things could not get more dreadful than they already were. Her dragon was poisoned and she was lost in a bog, her way hampered by will-o-wisps casting treacherous mists about her and winking false lights at her, so she could not get her bearings. She had tried putting down way markers, to show when she was circling back on herself, but some impish creature was scattering her markers as soon as her back was turned. At this rate they would both perish. It was only a matter of time.

‘All we need now is Old Man Bogey to show up,’ she muttered in despair. Then she clapped her hand over her mouth. One must never name a boggart on his own territory, or he would...

‘*Meewaarrrgh!*’

The boggart leapt out of a marshy hole and crouched in the pathway ahead. ‘*Meewarrgh—hah!*’

Myrtle stepped backwards and froze, as much fascinated by the boggart’s appearance as she was dismayed. The dragon gave a little shriek and puffed alternating balls of red and yellow smoke which merged to make a ghastly orange, like that of a rotting pumpkin. Where the poisonous smoke puffs landed, they shrivelled up whatever fell in their way. Marsh weeds, eels poking their grey heads above the mud, and a stumpy tree were enveloped in puffs; all were blackened and crumbled into a sorry heap.

‘Don’t frighten him!’ Myrtle shouted to the boggart. ‘Or he’ll destroy everything!’

‘*Reeawwrrgh!*’

‘And don’t use that foul language with me! Talk properly.’

The boggart was squat and ugly and it was hard to tell what part of him was boggart and what was marsh mud. Swamp eels slithered about his head, as though he wore a nest of them as a hat.

‘*I...will...eat...you...*’ he growled, the words coming thick and slow and oozy, as though language took a good deal of effort.

‘And what if I don’t want to be eaten?’ she said.

He tilted his thick, muddy head to one side as though taken aback by being asked a question, instead of receiving the reaction of terror. He let out another roar,

as though that would solve his dilemma.

'Meeaarrrghwarrgh!'

He made to move towards Myrtle, but she held up a hand.

'Stay where you are. My dragon is highly poisonous. You approach at your peril.'

The dragon let out a belch at this moment. It happened to fall on a passing will-o-wisp; its misty form turned acrid yellow, shuddered, contorted, then disappeared into droplets of yellow mist with a sizzling sound that made Myrtle think of sausages.

'Please don't breathe on living things,' she begged the dragon. 'Direct your puffs at the ground.'

She turned back to the boggart, who retreated a few steps on seeing the will-o-wisp destroyed.

'Sorry,' said Myrtle. 'He doesn't mean harm. Although,' she thought she would be wise to add, 'he would do anything to protect me.' The boggart stepped back again with a show of his sharp pointy teeth. Myrtle moved a step nearer, trying to see his teeth more clearly. The books always said that boggarts had dreadful fangs, fit to tear a horse or cow apart, but this boggart had fairly small teeth, more fit for tearing eels than cows.

'Get...away...' the boggart growled, waving his arms. Myrtle took another step nearer, desiring to see if his arms were truly as long and hairy as the books said they were, or if it were only trails of bogweed that gave them the misshapen look.

'What exactly do you eat?' Myrtle enquired. 'Might I see your fingers? Have you claws?'

'Away! Away!' roared the boggart, for with every step closer Myrtle took, the leashed dragon with his lethal breath, was forced to come nearer too.

'What...do...you...wish?' the boggart growled.

'Wish? I've never read of boggarts granting wishes. Can you grant a wish? Truly?'

The boggart waved his long arms and nodded his large head, the eels slithering about. Myrtle was not so foolish as to take him at his word; he was a darkling, after all, and they could be as slippery as a marsh eel. There were always unpleasant consequences with darkling wishes. You never quite got what you were expecting.

'I do not want any wish granted.'

The boggart shrank back farther.

'I only want directions to the Silver Woods.'

He stared at her, as though he could hardly believe that her request was so modest.

'Yuuu-eee-aaarghh-eee-ohhh!' he roared. It was such a long and loud roar that Myrtle thought she had angered him by refusing to accept a wish. But when the roar had subsided there was a subtle change in the air. The boggart had called upon the fae folk of his province. The will-o-wisps, who had darted away from the dragon now drew round their marsh king in obedience to his call. They clustered behind him, making a dense cloud of white above the darkness of the bog beneath. Little marsh sprites, like black moths, fluttered in nervous circles.

'Lead...the...witch...to...Silver...Woods,' ordered the boggart. The wisps separated into a trail, leading the way between two crooked shrubs to the right of where the marsh king stood. Myrtle could now see that there was the faintest path between the shrubs, so dull and flimsy and wreathed in darkling air, that she might never have seen it for herself, without a seeing spell to aid her.

‘This way,’ she commanded the dragon. ‘We must be quick.’ His eyes looked bleary. She must get him to the woods and seek aid with no more delay.

It was quite possible that the will-o-wisps were leading her astray; it would not be in their nature if they did not. But Myrtle could sense the smell of burnt horn in the air, which was one of the smells of fear. The wisps were afraid, and they had good reason to be. Who wanted to be evaporated by a cloud of poison?

So, she trusted that they really did wish to lead her away from their land, and when she glimpsed the first silvery bark of the Faerie willows, she gave a little groan of relief. There was hope. Not much, but enough to keep her trudging onwards, glad to feel the squelchy, sticky boggy ground yield to the firmer, surer ground of woodland leaf mulch. Until, that is, the ground fell away completely, and the will-o-wisps shrieked with wispy glee at the trick they had played on her at last. They had led her to the Silver Woods, but they had also led her straight into a hidden pit, and the suddenness of the fall caused the chain to rip from Myrtle’s hands, leaving the dragon behind.

AN UNGENIAL MORNING

Harriet felt she could sympathise with Master Woodhouse and his endless worrying, for she could not keep from imagining scenes pertaining to Rue and Myrtle's fate, or rather fates, for there were multiple ones. Even when she tried her utmost not to think about them and what might be happening to them, or had happened to them, suddenly a horrible new scenario popped into her head.

The list of perils was long: trolls, witches, giants, wolves and all manner of imps, boggarts, hags and nixies. It was terrifying how many dangers there were in the dark parts of Faerie. They hid in trees, toadstools, rivers and pools. They could lurk in woods and glades and marshes of mist. Her friends could be anywhere – in a giant's dungeon, waiting to have their bones ground for bread, enslaved in a witch's house, forced to do grisly work for her without food or rest. They could be carried off to a troll's lair, or a bear's den, or torn apart by a pack of wolves...

'Upon my word! How is it possible they will ever make it out alive?' she cried to the sprite in the potted palm in the library. 'I wish Mother Goodword would come home,' she lamented for the tenth time that morning. She sighed, and then she yawned, for it had been late when the carriage had brought her home from Hartfield last night. She had come in to find Cloe-Claws glaring at her and thumping her tail as though chiding her for being out so late. The Green Lady carving had likewise looked disapproving.

'I have not spent the evening in pleasure seeking,' Harriet told Cloe-Claws and the Green Lady. She was talking to them a good deal now that everyone else was gone. 'It was Godmothering work. I needed to see if Maid Fairfayce still carried the scent of a secret about her, and I can tell you she certainly does. It did not seem so strong as when I saw her at her aunt's house, but it was certainly there. Now I just need to find out if it has anything to do with the thief. And I only had one plate of dessert,' she added, when Cloe-Claws did not look convinced. 'A very small one. One must taste the bounty when at Hartfield.'

Cloe-Claws had herded her to the stairs, as though to make her go up to bed. Busie had been so kind as to light a fire in Harriet's room and lay out her nightgown.

After a night troubled by dreams of Myrtle and Rue falling into pits and dens and rivers, Harriet wandered listlessly about the library, not sure what had drawn her there, but feeling that the answer to her anxieties was to be found somewhere in that part of the school.

She picked up the books which Myrtle had left in a neat pile on a table. She took up *Mappes of Faerie* and found the map of the demesnes that bordered their own part of the world. Her eyes followed the path over the bridge, across the river, into the Wild Woods. Where had they gone next? Surely, they would have made their way to the Rushy Brook, and crossed over into the Green Lady's lands.

Perhaps they were already at the palace of the Green Lady to seek her help. Thinking of her friends safe in the beautiful palace gave her some comfort, but only a little, for there were still many dangers to encounter, even in the fair lands. There were many ways to be distracted from your journey, and though they might be very pleasant distractions of dancing and singing and feasting, yet they could keep a mortal away for years, a lifetime even. Harriet thought with fresh fears how awful it would be for Rue to come home only to find all her friends aged or gone. 'She will be so sad,' she whispered, imagining the scenes of grief and loss.

And what of Myrtle? She had no fear of darklings, but it was a foolish kind of bravery. One had a duty to be afraid of things worth fearing. Fear kept one safe, in an odd way. Master Woodhouse would understand that. Perhaps the little dragon would be a good protection for Myrtle, for no enchantment or spell would work on a dragon.

And meanwhile, what was she, Harriet, doing to help them? She had been going out every day, walking invisibly about in her cloak, looking and listening and sensing for clues as to the thief. Every day she and Mistress Woodhouse made visits in the village. They were up to 'J' on their list of names.

'I am a useless friend and Godmother,' she told the palm tree sprite. 'I am not worthy to bear the name of Godmother. I have no clue as to my ward's match. I have no clue as to the wand thief. Meanwhile, my friends are in terrible danger. A friend does not sit by idly while her friends are in danger, do they?' The sprite could not answer her this, for he had no friends to be endangered.

'I feel I ought to *do* something,' she told Cloe-Claws, now that the sprite had disappeared back into his fern. She looked back down at the map spread out before her. *Troll Bridge River, Mischief Marsh, Nixie's Well, Three Covens' Dale, Vale of Blackness, Sleepers' Glen*. She shivered at the images that such place names suggested. But her eye kept being drawn back to that silvery ribbon, the path of the fair, threading its way through the dark and haunted places. If only she had the courage. 'If only I had the courage, and could make up my mind to it,' she said out loud, and at the word 'courage' she felt a little vibration in the air, as when one released a spell or made a wish in the presence of magic.

Something near the fireplace caught her eye – a glint and shimmer. Lady Stormont's armour stood in the alcove to the side of the fire. Harriet stared at it as a new thought struck her, but she shook it off. For now.

She moved to the window, pursing up her lips as she considered whether it would be too wet to go out. There was a dreadfully big, black cloud to the north, but it might not reach Highbury for some time yet; it might drift away altogether to rain on some other village. If she had some Dust, she could have made a little wind to push the cloud away. But rain cloud or not, she very much wanted to go to Hartfield that morning; it was too quiet at the school, and her worries were too loud.

She ran upstairs and rummaged in her clothes chest for her pattens, hidden beneath her summer shawl. As she lifted the shawl up, a memory came to her, and she sat back on her heels for a minute, fingering the soft fabric, and remembering how Robert Martin always placed it on her when they all went out for evening walks. It had been very nice to have someone pay kind attentions. She gave a little sigh, and wondered that she should feel so wistful. Why, anyone would think she had *liked* Robert Martin, for her to be thinking of him in such a way.

Too much thinking and feeling hurt her head. Mistress Woodhouse would soon set her thoughts on the right path. She always did. They would talk over the previous evening, when Mistress Woodhouse and Maid Fairfayce had both sung and played at the spinet in the drawing room of Hartfield.

How lovely it must be to be so clever as to play and sing so well. Harriet only knew country songs, and would not dream of singing them in front of such superior people. She would sing them with the children at school, and with the Martins during the Midsummer feast – that had been a delightful evening. But she would not dream of singing such songs in front of elegant people. She wondered if she would ever have another summer evening of singing and dancing beneath the moon, with the firefly lanterns shining, and the mead flowing, and Robert Martin taking her hand to lead her in the dance. He did not look plain at all by moonlight...

‘Dear me,’ she scolded herself. ‘I hope you know better than to think of Robert Martin! All of Highbury in a muddle and Rue and Myrtle and Ben Larkins gone who knows where, and here you are thinking of such things as country dances and country singing – I’m quite ashamed of you!’

And she snatched up her cloak and pattens and hurried downstairs, needing to rush to Hartfield to have her thoughts set into their proper place.

As she went down Highbury broadway, she passed the door to Maid Flitchen’s house, and thought she would just call in for a minute to see how her new gown was coming along. Maid Flitchen’s mother was a good source of gossip, and clues could often be gleaned through talk, like finding tiny nuggets of gold amidst mud and slurry. The big black rain cloud still looked far away enough for her to spare the time.

She was sure she had not stayed more than five minutes, Maid Flitchen’s mother had only talked of being kept up all night by something dancing on the roof, likely a hobgoblin up to mischief, and of the talk of Clayton Park being quite overrun with imps in the gardens. The gnomes had been battling with them for three days now. But when Harriet stepped out of the cottage and gained the street again, the black cloud was looming right above her, and fat drops of rain fell, first slowly, and then, as she walked on quickly, it drove harder, so hard that she thought she had best duck into Ford’s shop to wait out the shower.

She took a seat near the door, watching through the window to see how the weather fared, when who should come in, but Elizabeth Martin and her brother!

Harriet felt a strange giddiness come over her at the sight of him. She had not seen him since the day she and Mistress Woodhouse had met him on the Donwell road, and that was before the *proposal*.

He was not so sun-browned now as he was then, and he had not the linen smock and breeches on that he wore in the summer, but was dressed smartly in breeches and jacket and a snowy linen shirt and cravat. He took off his hat at the door and shook the rain from it outside and wiped his boots on the mat. Elizabeth looked in Harriet’s direction, and Harriet was sure that she saw her, but Elizabeth looked away again quickly, and crossed to the far side of the shop.

Harriet felt tears stinging her eyes. It was too hard to see her good friend ignore her. She would not have done so if Robert had not been with her. Was Elizabeth offended with Harriet and her refusal of her brother? She’d had no opportunity to ask her, not having seen her since that brief visit when she had run into the library to tell of Rue going into Faerie. But things could never be the same again between them all.

All the happiness of the summer was now ruined, never to be repeated ever again. Harriet wished herself far away, wished she were anywhere in the world at that moment except sitting in Ford’s, trapped by the heavy rain, with Robert and Elizabeth ignoring her not twenty feet away. She tried so hard not to watch them,

but she was painfully aware of them even without meaning to be. She saw Robert Martin glance in her direction and knew by the sudden jolt that passed through him that he had seen her and was affected by the sight.

He and Elizabeth began whispering together. They were certainly talking of her, and this increased her misery; he seemed to be persuading Elizabeth to something. Elizabeth finally gave a little nod and then crossed the shop floor and came quite up to Harriet, saying, 'Robert bids me to ask how you do?' and holding out her hand.

Harriet stood up and took the hand and murmured a greeting. She knew not what she said, her mind was so flustered.

'I'm sorry that we never meet at the farm now as we used to,' said Elizabeth. She had a little basket on her arm, and something inside it moved, lifting the cloth cover a little.

'So am I,' Harriet replied, her eyes distracted by the basket, wondering what was in it. 'Have you bought a new chick?' she asked, scrambling for something to say.

'No,' said Elizabeth rather quickly, putting her basket behind her back.

'How is May, and your mother? I never got chance to ask after them when you came to the school that time. You ran away as fast as you came.' Her eyes involuntarily darted between Elizabeth's face and the figure of Master Martin, who was lingering on the other side of the shop, twisting his hat around in his hands. But suddenly Master Martin was not on the other side of the shop – suddenly he was crossing the floor with his long strides, and in no time at all he was right before Harriet, making a bow and asking how she did.

'Very well, I thank you,' Harriet stammered in reply.

'Dreadful bout of rain,' said Robert, gripping his hat tightly. 'Only good for frogs.'

Elizabeth shot him an odd look.

'Yes,' said Harriet, feeling as though her heart were hammering as hard as the rain against the window. 'Dreadful rain. So very... um... wet.'

'Any news of Rue?' Elizabeth asked.

'No,' said Harriet sadly. 'Myrtle has gone after her.'

'She has!' Elizabeth looked alarmed.

'You won't follow them, will you?' Robert Martin asked, looking even more alarmed than his sister.

'I must look after the school,' Harriet replied, not meeting his eyes.

'It's been weeks since Rue left,' said Elizabeth, clutching her basket more tightly.

'I know. But time is different in Faerie. It may only be days for them. Waiting is so hard.'

'You will let me know the moment you hear anything?' Elizabeth pressed.

'Of course.'

There was a painful silence until an unexpected sound broke it. Harriet looked round in surprise. 'I thought I heard a croak.'

'I think the rain has stopped!' cried Elizabeth.

'Oh, so it has.' Harriet felt a rush of relief now she could now run away and be free of this dreadful trembling and stammering and heart-hammering and hardly knowing what she saying. 'I must go,' she said, as though her very life depended on it. She bowed, and said goodbye, and rushed out of the door, thinking she heard another croak behind her as she left.

She had not got three yards from the door when she heard a voice.

'Maid Smith!'

Robert Martin was hurrying after her. The rain was not quite ceased, but it was only a soft drizzle, and behind Robert, arching over the fields in the distance was a glorious rainbow, full, and glowing brighter than a firefly lantern against the deep grey of the sky.

The rainbow and the face of Robert Martin seemed quite as one in Harriet's mind at that moment; it was all she could do not to give a little gasp of admiration. The look in his eyes was so earnest, so full of feeling, that she was sure he was going to make a declaration to her. He was going to beg her to reconsider his proposal. He was going to tell her how much he loved her, how he could not endure life without her by his side. Would she not reconsider? Would she not give him a word of hope? In that strange rainbow-hued moment she felt all the magic of an attraction to one whose heart was so faithful to her.

'Yes,' she said to him, half in query to his calling out to her, half in answer to her own thoughts. She meant, *Yes, I will give you hope of my hand, I think I shall... I think I have now decided... I think I might have changed my mind...*

'If you are going Hartfield, you had better go round by Master Cole's stables, for you shall find the near way quite floated by this rain.' The look in Robert Martin's eyes was one of yearning, and his voice was soft, but he only spoke of rain. 'But don't go too near the stalls. There's a donkey there that escapes, and runs after folk. It chased Hannah Hazeldene all the way to Randalls the other day and had to be dragged away from her.'

'Oh. Thank you. So kind... most obliged... goodbye...'

He was gone, and the rainbow melted in the blink of an eye as a passing cloud hid the sun again.

E She had seen Mistress Baytes and Jane Fairfayce hurry down the drive, having refused the offer of Master Woodhouse's carriage, and now Emma watched as another heavy shower passed over. The rain would certainly be detaining Harriet from coming. She hoped that Harriet did not set out and pass up the Broadway at the exact time as Mistress Baytes bustled down it. That would be most unfortunate timing. Harriet must not hear the news in the street; Emma must break it to her gently in private. She gave a loud sigh without realising it.

'Are you well, Emma?' her father asked from across the room. 'I thought I heard you yawn. Are you fatigued, my dear? You stayed up a little late last night. You must take better care of yourself. You ought to do as I do and go off to bed early with a cup of hot milk.'

'I did not yawn, Papa,' said Emma. 'I merely sighed at the heaviness of the rain.'

'It is dreadfully wet,' agreed her father. 'I hope Mistress Baytes and her niece do not get wet on their way home. I wish they could have stayed a little longer to be sure of the rain clearing. I do not understand how people can be so careless of their health. To be out in all weather, and merely for a bit of conversation. I like conversation with old friends very well, but it must not be done at the expense of one's health. And did not Mistress Baytes say she already had a cold? I hope she does not spread it abroad. I hope you did not stand too close to her, Emma, when you were giving her tea. I hope she did not cough or sneeze while you were at hand with the jam fingers. I wish Serle would not make so many sweet things. I do not think the habit of serving sweet things in the daytime ought to be encouraged, no more than visiting friends in the rain, I really do not.'

‘Now, Papa,’ said Emma, leaving her watch at the window to attend to her father who was getting dangerously agitated on the subject of jam and rain. ‘Mistress Baytes will have reached home in no time, for you know how quick a walker she is. And Maid Fairfayce will be even speedier, for I understand she loves to walk, and goes out as often as she can. Rest assured they will be home and dry. And as for Mistress Baytes’s cold, why she had barely the remnant of one. She did not sneeze or cough once, I assure you.’

‘But the jam fingers,’ moaned Master Woodhouse.

‘There was but a smidgen of jam, Papa. And it is Donwell strawberry jam. How often have I heard you say that Donwell strawberries are excellent fruit? You cannot think a little taste of Donwell strawberry jam can do our guests any harm.’

‘But she ate two of them, Emma,’ her father groaned.

‘But they are so very small, Papa, barely a mouthful. A child could eat two of Serle’s jam fingers and it would not be overmuch. And Maid Fairfayce did not finish all of one. She only ate one half of a jam finger.’

‘She is a sensible girl. And a very pretty girl. And she plays and sings almost as well as you, my dear. But it would have been better if she had eaten none.’

‘Ah, I hear voices, it must be Harriet!’

‘Make sure she has not wet feet, Emma! There is nothing so bad as damp shoes. And do not feed her jam. Give her hot tea, but my nerves cannot bear any more jam.’

Emma thought to herself that her own nerves could not bear any more suspense. She had all the disagreeableness before her of breaking the surprising news that had gusted in with Mistress Baytes’s damp cloak. She braced herself and went to meet her friend.

Harriet looked agitated and dishevelled, and Emma could only suppose the worst had happened – she had met with Mistress Baytes and knew all.

‘Oh! Mistress Woodhouse, what do you think has happened!’

Emma thought she could not show Harriet any greater kindness than in listening. ‘Tell me all, Harriet, my poor dear. Come and tell me all.’

But what Harriet had to tell was not what Emma expected. The whole of Harriet’s distress and excitement was due to nothing more than a meeting with that impudent farmer, Robert Martin! Whatever Emma’s thoughts on the man were, he held far more sway in Harriet’s for she would talk and talk and relate over and over every word, every look, every gesture until Emma was forced to put an end to the sorry business by diverting her attention to another source of misery.

‘Harriet, dear, you must be very brave.’

‘I shall try, Mistress Woodhouse, indeed I shall. I shall try to think of him no more, I have so much else to think of, such very important things. Life and death things!’

‘Yes dear, but I was referring to something else. I have something to tell you that I am sorry to say will cause you pain.’

‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, what can it be? Have you had some dreadful news? It is not Myrtle and Rue, is it? Master Knightley has not found their poor, broken bodies washed up in the river, has he? Torn to pieces by giants or trolls or bears!’ Some of Harriet’s prior scenarios of her friend’s fates rushed into her mind.

‘No, Harriet, what very morbid thoughts! It is not quite so bad as that. In fact, some people might even call it pleasant news, but I think it will grieve you. Oh, Harriet, there is no easy way to tell you this, but this morning I heard that Master Elftyn is engaged to be married.’

‘Engaged? Master Elftyn? But he is not here. How can he get engaged when he is not here?’

‘He has met someone in town. Maid Hawkins is her name. That is all that is known of her at present.’

Harriet was all amazement. ‘But he has been gone so short a time. He cannot have made a match with a stranger. Can he?’

‘It would seem he has.’

‘Oh.’ She was silent for some moments. ‘Then he must have fallen deeply in love with her,’ was her conclusion. ‘It must have been a very romantic match. He must have seen her and known instantly that she was the very woman for him, just like in the romances. Perhaps he read poetry to her. Perhaps he wrote her a riddle. She must be very beautiful to have captured his heart so quickly. But really, Mistress Woodhouse, I am only surprised. I am only sorry that I made such an error of judgment in regards to him.’

Her thoughts quickly left Master Elftyn, and rushed back to the scene in Ford’s with Robert Martin, and then the picture of Rue and Myrtle floating down the river came back to her and she cried out, ‘Oh dear. What a dreadfully horrid day. I do not know that it could get any worse!’

At that there came a rolling of thunder and a flash of lightning that made Emma jump and Harriet squeak.

Emma did not know what to reply. She was trying to think of something comforting to say. She was tempted to run down Master Elftyn and his fickle heart, for a man who could transfer his affections from herself to another in a matter of a few short weeks did not hold well in her opinion. What was such a shallow regard worth? But she thought it would be better not to abuse Master Elftyn’s unsteady affections in light of Harriet’s sad thoughts. So, she kept silent, and rang the bell to ask for tea and jam fingers to be brought up. Jam and tea would be the best comfort for Harriet for now.

AN UNFORTUNATE ACQUAINTANCE

‘So,’ said Master Knightley, ‘there is to be a wedding. It seems to be all I hear of wherever I go, along with the daily complaints against imps and hobgoblins. I pity any young lady who comes into Highbury while all is so unsettled.’

‘A wedding always has the benefit of distracting people’s minds from disagreeable things,’ answered Emma, who felt the unintended falsity of her words once she had said them. For while Emma had some curiosity to see what kind of young lady this Maid Hawkins was, whom Master Elftyn had rushed headlong into a lifelong attachment to, she did not relish seeing him again for the first time since that dreadful proposal on Midwinter Eve.

‘And there is even better news to cheer us,’ said Emma. ‘Master Weston’s son is expected very soon.’

‘Was he not expected these past five months?’ Master Knightley said dryly. ‘It would have been fitting for him to call last autumn on the occasion of his father’s marriage. I thought it a shame he should disappoint the Westons by such a lack of proper attention. And now he proposes to come into Highbury at such a time.’

Emma gave Master Knightley a look of warning, anxious for her father; Master Knightley had now twice referred to Highbury being in an unsettled state.

‘He has been murmuring about coming many times these past months,’ said Master Knightley. ‘Likely he will not come this time either.’

‘I really think he will come this time,’ Emma said with cheerful confidence. ‘I have a foretelling that he shall, just as I had foretelling that he would not come on previous occasions. He was not at liberty to come before. His aunt is a formidable woman, as Mistress Weston tells me, and she keeps him closely tied to her. And it is not easy to travel into England when one lives over the border. There are few gateways left into Faerie, as you know. Legitimate gateways, that is.’ The thought of the darkling bridge came unpleasantly into her mind. ‘It is a pity the Green Man’s doorway only opens at Midsummer, and one can only pass through it when bid. How delightful it would have been if Master Frank Charmall had visited his father regularly by passing through our own Hall.’

‘He manages to visit idle watering holes in the south,’ said Master Knightley. ‘Was he not in one of them last autumn, at the same time as Maid Fairfayce? I heard all about it from her aunt. If he could come into England on pleasure-seeking jaunts, he could make a dutiful visit to his own father. Why, he has not visited here in the twenty or more years since he left. I call that very poor. It shows a want of respect.’

‘You are too hard upon him,’ Emma said. ‘Far harsher than his own father, for Master Weston quite understands his son’s difficulties. It is all due to the aunt. She is a very demanding woman and has considerable fae powers that he could not withstand. His trips abroad are quite at her discretion, but for the main part she

keeps him shut away on her estate. He deserves your pity, not your censure, Master Knightley.'

She looked directly at him and was arrested by the lines of fatigue on his face. She wished she could ask him if it were due to his long hours of guarding the bridge, but she could not raise the subject before her father.

'I do not think young people ought to rush into marriage,' said Master Woodhouse, who had not been paying attention to the subject of Frank Charmall, but was still ruminating over the news of Master Elftyn's betrothal.

Master Woodhouse sat with an unopened book on his knee, for it was too wet outside for his morning walk. He had marvelled that Master Knightley should walk over after breakfast to see them, but Master Knightley assured him that his boots were perfectly watertight and he disregarded the rain. January had now yielded to February, but the weather was as changeable as it had been since the time of the theft. One hour rain, sometimes soft and summery, other times as fierce as Grand Godmother North passing by in her carriage; another hour it might be sun. Frost came when one least expected it, then urgent downpours of hail which played havoc with what remained of people's gardens, and sudden thunder which startled the household brownies into hiding in broom cupboards they being as fearful of thunder as the horses in the stables.

Emma was about to say that Master Elftyn was not rushing into marriage, but then recalled that he was. 'Four weeks is a very short time to know a person,' she thought aloud, addressing her thoughts more to Master Knightley than to her father.

'Elftyn is a man who knows his own mind,' said Master Knightley. 'I have often observed that while he acts the poet-spouting charmer before young ladies, he is a hard-nosed, rational-speaking fellow when in company with men.'

'Is that so?' Emma had a sudden realisation that she did not know quite so much as she thought she did, which was very discomfiting. She thought she had sensed Master Elftyn rather well. But clearly her interpretation of him had been somewhat faulty and blind. She gave a little shake of her head with her heavy crown of braids. But she would not own fault and blindness for more than a few moments. Rather call them underdeveloped understanding.

'I hope your little Godmother friend is not too disappointed,' Master Knightley said, speaking quietly, so Master Woodhouse would not hear. 'I did warn you not to think of Elftyn in regarding her when we had that *disagreement* over her refusal of Robert Martin.'

'So you did,' said Emma. 'It must be very pleasing to always be right.' She smiled to disguise the irritation beneath her words. Master Knightley only smiled in return, as though he knew exactly what she was thinking. She always had the feeling that Master Knightley was the one person in the world who could see her without any veil of charm over his eyes. At times that was disagreeable and inconvenient, but in her heart, she knew she would not have it any other way. Her world would seem horribly out of balance were it not anchored by Master Knightley's steadiness. He was as immovable and necessary as the North Star, more so than ever in these difficult days.

'Why must young people marry?' Master Woodhouse said, returning to the subject once his tea was to his liking. 'It is such an unsettling thing. One's family all moved about, the young lady leaving her home. I cannot think of anything more dreadful. Consider your sister, poor Isabella, my dear. How dreadful was it when she left us to marry? And poor Maid Taylor, she left us also to marry Master Weston. It is shocking to have one's household broken up, and now this young lady will leave her home, and break up her family's household to come and live here

with Master Elftyn. They should not do it. They ought to think of their families.'

'But marriage is generally an expansion of one's family, Papa,' Emma argued gently. 'When a young lady marries, her parents gain a son, do they not? Consider how pleasant it is to have Isabella's husband with us when they visit. And think of the children. Consider how Isabella has made you not merely a father but a grandfather, Papa. How delightful her children are, and how they love to come and sit by you and talk to you.'

Master Woodhouse did not deny these facts, but after a few slow sips of tea he observed that Isabella's children did make a good deal of noise at times.

'Of course they make a good deal of noise at times,' agreed Emma. 'All children who have healthy bodies and lively spirits like to run about and talk and laugh and play. You would not wish them to be subdued. You would wish them to be strong and stout and clever, Papa.'

'You were very fond of running about,' her father observed. 'But Isabella would sooner sit and play with her dolls. She would talk to them so prettily.'

'While I would romp like a boy,' admitted Emma. 'I could be a little wild, to be sure. But Mistress Weston was always there to watch over me and make sure I came to no harm. I am sure I have very happy memories of romping about the grounds, Papa, and it makes me very glad to think Isabella's children will do the same.' Emma was silent for some moments as other childhood memories came to mind, ones that were not so pleasant. Memories of her father speaking the binding words that kept her shut up in the tower, all because he had heard a rumour of a witch in the vicinity. But no witch ever did appear; likely it had been a gypsy or roamer or vagrant passing through. Sometimes it would be many days before Master Woodhouse's fears were allayed enough for Emma to be released. She shook off such unhappy memories, and forced herself to speak brightly, turning to Master Knightley to say, 'Did you think me a wild child, Master Knightley?'

'As a moorland colt,' was the reply. 'But you did not shoot your sibling with arrows as John and Isabella's boys do. Your play did still include a good deal of daisy-chain making and homely straw-castle building, though I daresay your games might have been a little more combative had you a brother.'

'Arrows?' said Master Woodhouse in alarm.

'Harmless arrows, sir. Made of bits of twig. Perfectly harmless. Boys generally do like to play at such things.'

'They must not play at arrows. Not even twig ones. Twigs can have very sharp ends. They could do great harm if they struck an eye. Emma, you must not let Isabella's children play at arrows!'

Master Knightley gave Emma an apologetic glance, and deftly turned the conversation away from all dangerous subjects such as marriage and toy arrows, whilst thinking of the irony of the actual dangers of the snarling man-eating troll he had despatched with his sword the evening before, and began to talk of farming business, which was a safe subject with Master Woodhouse. Better to talk of turnips crops than see Master Woodhouse reduced to a quivering shadow.

W more at ease over his tea, Emma was at liberty to think about the pleasure of Frank Charmall's coming visit, and the wonder of Master Elftyn's mysterious bride and imminent wedding. Of the two subjects, Frank Charmall held the most interest for her, for she had long entertained ideas of him, and wondered what such a man would be like. He must be very different from other young men, having grown up in Faerie. There was something quite romantic about his story.

Her thoughts graduated to Harriet. She must think of something for them to do that morning to divert Harriet from her troubled thoughts. She was continually fretting over her Godmothering Sisters, which was understandable, but not good for Harriet's nerves. Perhaps it was a good thing that Harriet was engaged to call at the Mill Farm later that week. It was an unfortunate engagement, and Emma could wish that Elizabeth Martin had not sent it after seeing Harriet in Ford's that time, but she would take care of her friend in ensuring she stayed for as short a time as was acceptable. The visit would be a fresh source of agitation to Harriet, but it might be a good distraction from the worries and fears that she was continually under these days.



Harriet certainly was a confusing tangle at that time. How she longed for Mother Goodword to come home; nothing comforted her much in these days. In her pocket lay the letter. She had found it waiting for her when she had come home the day before. A little note from Elizabeth Martin, saying that she trusted that Harriet would forward on any news she heard regarding Rue and Myrtle, and adding in short, but friendly lines, that she hoped that Harriet would call upon her and May and Mistress Martin in the afternoon one day next week. Harriet had agonised over this invitation: ought she to go? It would seem horribly ungrateful not to, but how awkward it would be if Master Martin were there.

She had taken the note straight round to Mistress Woodhouse who had not seemed pleased with the invitation, but agreed that it would be rude to ignore it. Thus, she was to go Mill Farm. Mistress Woodhouse had even said she would take Harriet in the carriage, which was very kind, but Harriet was filled with conflicted feelings. Her Sisters might be enduring terrible hardships and dangers, and here she was, making afternoon visits to the Martins, as though life were quite normal. Yet, the thought of giving up the visit pained her, for she felt very lonely in the empty school, with only Busie and Cloe-Claws for company. She would go and be on the lookout for any clues. It would only be a short call, after all.

When Harriet was set down at the entrance to the farmhouse. She heard Mistress Woodhouse reminding her that she would return in a quarter of an hour, so Harriet was not to worry about taking her hat and gloves off, there would not be time for that. But Harriet barely registered what she was being told, so taken aback was she with a sudden rush of memories of when she had last walked along this very path the summer before.

The apple trees were in the same place, though bare of fruit and leaves. The thatched roof still sloped in neat lines, like a silvery-grey blanket resting comfortably over the eaves and upper windows. The willow figurine of the life-sized stork still stood atop the thatched roof; it was a wonder it had withstood the turbulent weather of late, but then, it was woven of fae willow, to give beneficence over the house.

The white gate she pushed open still squeaked a little, and the bantam cockerel who considered it his duty to guard the farmhouse from any intruder, be they four-footed or two, came rushing round the corner of the half-timbered house, protesting loudly at her, but Harriet knew he was all squawk and tail feathers, and to simply ignore him, and hurry on.

The printed-linen curtains at the front parlour window twitched, and Harriet saw May's dark head moved from the window to reappear at the farmhouse door.

'How do you do?' May said, bobbing a little curtsy, as though Harriet were a lady of rank, and not just Harriet. 'We're glad you've come. Mother and Eliza are in the front parlour waiting.'

Harriet felt abashed at this polite greeting; she and May had laughed and taken turns on the garden swing many times over the summer, and now it was as though they were not altogether the same people anymore. But she smiled shyly and entered the house, almost wanting to giggle in her nervousness, but finding that her old giggle was quite gone out of her, and she could only give a few soft sighs as poignant memories struck her. There came the sweet and smoky scent of the apple wood which Mistress Martin liked to put on the fire. Then there was the smell of May's cooking wafting from the kitchen. 'Have you been making your cinnamon bread?' she asked, as they passed through the main hallway.

'Yes,' said May. 'I remembered you liked it. It's Robert's favourite too.'

'I thought he did not care for sweet things.'

'He says the smell reminds him of you.'

'Oh.'

Now they were in the parlour and Mistress Martin and Elizabeth were coming forward to greet her, and urging her to take off her bonnet and gloves, and May admired her new pink gown and said she looked like a rosebush in it, and Harriet felt her cheeks grow first hot with embarrassment and then pale with misery, for although everyone was so kind, and she was so pleased to see them all looking well, yet there was an awkwardness in the air. Everything looked just as it had done before, yet nothing was as it was before, and the very fact that no one spoke the name of *Robert* hung in the air between them all, conspicuous by its very absence.

Harriet had to decline tea, saying that Mistress Woodhouse was coming for her in the carriage, and she could only stay a very short while.

'But you will stay for dinner,' said May, not disguising her disappointment. 'There's game pie and cinnamon bread and we saved the best of the butter and cream from going to market, and you will want to visit Gladioli and the other cows afterwards. We were sure you would stay for dinner.'

Harriet felt so grieved she was ready to cry. They had been expecting her to spend the whole of the afternoon with them, and in that moment, she wished heartily that she could. But Mistress Woodhouse was coming very soon, and she could never keep Mistress Woodhouse waiting.

She had to decline the injunction to remove her bonnet for the same reasons, and her gloves, and with every declination she made she felt the air grow more uncomfortable, as though she were the one acting as a stranger while they were trying to be as friendly as in past times.

They all made very commonplace comments on the weather and the cows and Harriet was puzzled to see that Elizabeth had the same little basket beside her she had been carrying when she met her in Ford's – a little basket with a cover that would keep moving, as though there were something living in it. Harriet's eyes kept returning to it, even as she answered the stilted questions, and tried hard to think of things to ask in reply. At last she could not refrain from saying, 'What is in the basket, Elizabeth. Is it a little kitten, or a bird you are nursing?'

'No,' said Elizabeth bluntly, moving her foot so that her gown hid the basket from view. 'It's nothing of interest. Just something I promised to mind for a friend.'

'Do you know,' Mistress Martin said suddenly, 'I think you have grown since the autumn, Harriet. Why, when you came in you looked a full four inches taller

than May, and she was but two inches less when you were all measured. Do you remember?’

Mistress Martin gestured to the wainscot by the window where a row of pencilled marks had been made. There was a sudden lift in the air, as they all smiled in one accord, remembering the very hour and day that those marks had been made. *He* had made them. They had all taken their turn to stand at the wainscot, and he had used a book to measure the top of their heads and pencilled a mark and written their names and the date beside each.

May’s had been the shortest, with Harriet two inches above, and Elizabeth three inches above her. And then May had said that Robert ought to take his turn, and Elizabeth and Harriet had joined in to press him into it, and Elizabeth had stood on tiptoe to stretch up and mark above his head, and he’d had to hold the book up himself, for none of them could reach so high. He had been a full eleven inches taller than Harriet.

Harriet took her place against the wainscot, smiling and dimpling and blushing at the attention as she removed her bonnet and May stood on tiptoe to hold the book above her while Elizabeth made the new mark, and they all exclaimed that she really was three inches taller than she had been in September, but Elizabeth reminded them that when the first measurements had been taken, they had all stood in stockinged feet, and so there was more merriment as May recalled how Robert had taken off his boots only to show a great hole in his knitted sock, and Mistress Martin had scolded him for not giving the sock to her to be darned before the hole had gotten so big.

Thus they agreed they could only make a true measurement of Harriet if she unlaced her short boots, and Harriet was happy to oblige, feeling something like happiness for the first time in many long days at this return of old easy friendship, but there was a firm rap at the door, and the maid was heard to answer it, then came in to say the coachman had sent word that Mistress Woodhouse was waiting in the carriage outside.

The merriment faded as Harriet hurried to retie her boots, put on her bonnet, and take up her cloak.

‘It was so nice to see you all,’ she said in parting, feeling all the brevity of the visit, and the formality it made. Old friends did not rush away; only visitors who felt obliged to call made their visits so short. They all felt it, and all were disappointed.

Harriet left the room, with May escorting her to the door.

‘It’s a frog,’ was the last thing May said, speaking in a whisper as though it were a secret.

‘A frog?’

‘In the basket. But it’s a secret.’

‘A secret frog?’

There was no time for further questions. Mistress Woodhouse sat upright in an attitude of expectation – the sure expectation of a person who was not accustomed to being kept waiting.

Harriet hurried down the path, dodging the cockerel, past the espalier apple trees, through the white gate and climbed up into the carriage and took her seat. Mistress Woodhouse urged the driver to walk on quickly, in case they should get caught in a shower.

Harriet waved goodbye to the solitary figure in the farmhouse doorway. May lifted a hand in return, but neither of them smiled. Had Harriet turned to look behind her, she would have seen the broad-shouldered figure of Robert Martin,

walking across the path from the orchard, hurrying as though anxious to reach the farmhouse quickly, but coming to a sudden halt as he spied the carriage pulling away. He watched the figure in her winter bonnet with her new pink ribbons disappearing down the lane long before they had expected her to leave. The broad shoulders slumped in disappointment, and he turned away again.

TEMPTATION

Myrtle had dropped feet first into darkness, after being misled into the hole at the edge of the Silver Woods. She shouted out, first with surprise at the sudden loss of solidity beneath her, and then with a muffled ‘*Oof!*’ as she landed on a pile of something soft. Then she wailed a desperate ‘*No!*’ as she realised with horror that the silver chain had slipped through her hands, and the dragon was not with her.

‘*Dragon!*’ she shouted, or tried to shout, for something soft and tickly filled her mouth and garbled her words as she tried to spit and shout at the same time. Scrambling to her feet was not easy either, for whatever it was she had landed on was squishy.

‘Halloo, halloo there!’ came a voice from somewhere nearby. A light approached and Myrtle braced herself to meet whatever it was.

‘I was not expecting company,’ said the voice, ‘did I leave the hatch open again? I hope the sacks broke your fall?’ A fae creature the size of a mortal child, but with the face of an older woman, came into view, holding up a lantern and peering at Myrtle.

‘I would have lit the lamp if I’d known you were coming,’ she said, bustling up to something and fiddling with it until a second glow of light appeared, lighting up the space where Myrtle had fallen.

‘Feathers!’ said Myrtle, spitting out another one. A cloud of many-hued feathers floated in the air like strange snowfall, then drifted leisurely down to where Myrtle had landed.

‘Nice and soft,’ said the little fairy woman ‘Would not have a friend fall and hurt themselves. I forget to shut the hatch sometimes, and people do drop in, which is very nice. This way.’ She turned and shuffled down a passage out of sight.

‘Wait!’ called Myrtle, not wanting to leave the entrance high above her, knowing that the dragon, the sickening dragon, was up there all alone. ‘Come back! How do I get up?’ But she was gone, and Myrtle could see no steps or ladder to aid her escape. She had no choice but to follow the fairy; there had to be another way out.

The passageway of earthen walls led to a large, round room with all the appearance of a homely cottage, except there was no daylight, and all was cast in a soft yellow glow from the round firefly lantern, hanging from the ceiling. But where was the fairy? ‘Hello?’ Myrtle called out. ‘Where are you?’

‘Only here,’ said a voice directly behind Myrtle. She carried a great tray of food and placed it on a table, set with a cloth that glowed like gossamer. ‘Sit and eat, sit and eat,’ she urged, putting a platter and cup down and arranging the food. It looked very good: bowls of berries, mushrooms, and some kind of bread, still steaming from the oven. Myrtle realised how famished she was, but then recalled the dangers

of eating Faerie food without payment, and, more importantly, recalled that she ought not to be here at all.

‘I cannot stay,’ she said, ‘my friend is above ground, and he is sick. Show me the way back. Where is the door?’

There didn’t appear to be any doors in the room, and neither did the fairy woman seem to hear. She was cutting up the bread into thick slices. The smell wafted beguilingly through the soft-lit room. It was very hard not to give into the temptation to just relax in this cosy place. Myrtle could almost forget about what lay above ground. She could almost yield to the needs of rest and comfort and a full belly...

‘Show me the way back!’ she said determinedly. She would not abandon the dragon for a loaf of sweet, warm bread, and a great bowl of mushrooms stew that smelled *so good*... The old woman placed the food before her.

‘Eat.’ She smiled warmly, and all the grandmothers in the world who had made delicious cakes to set before their grandchildren was in that smile and in the smell of the food wafting over Myrtle. And Myrtle had never known the softness of a mother or grandmother making her cake or bread and taking pleasure in watching her eating it, so the fascination of the fairy was most compelling. And yet... the dragon!

‘I *must* get back to my friend,’ she said, trying a more conciliatory tone rather than a demand. ‘*Please* help me. He’s sick. He ate a swamp toad. Two swamp toads.’

The fairy raised her kindly eyebrows. ‘Bad, very bad.’ She shook her head. ‘Eat first and we’ll see what we can do.’ And she smiled so sweetly that Myrtle felt all her resistance draining away as the fairy-persuasion washed over her, and hunger drove her to the table and moved her to take her first bite.

M She slept with her mouth open and one arm and leg hanging over the side of the large, overstuffed mattress she had been encouraged to lie down on after her meal.

She awoke to find the fairy woman smiling over her. ‘Sweet dreams, dearie? Time for tea.’

Tea. That sounded pleasant, Myrtle stretched and yawned, feeling she had not slept so well in a long time. The room was still cosy and warm and the fragrant smell of some herbal concoction mingled with the earthy, woody warmth.

She was about to take her first sip of tea when a thought struck her like lightning.

She leapt up from the chair, exclaiming, ‘What am I doing!’ She looked around, searching for a doorway. Where is the door? ‘I must go! How do I get out?’

The fairy smiled and held out a plate. ‘Biscuit.’

‘You don’t understand! My friend, he’s sick!’

‘Ate a swamp toad,’ said the woman sympathetically. ‘Dear, dear.’

‘*Two* swamp toads, and I *must* help him! Are you keeping me a prisoner?’

As Myrtle looked at the fairy woman’s gentle, kindly face, she realised what a foolish question that was. How could such a dear old lady be so despicable as to keep anyone a prisoner? But the hole... it had been a trap – ‘You are!’ Myrtle cried, moving away from the table, sure now that if she drank one drop of the tea, she would be beguiled into forgetfulness again. ‘By the Green Man and the Green Lady, I command that you let me go!’

The old woman gave a little start at this and dropped the biscuits. 'But I only want to bless you,' she protested, 'with tea and soup and biscuits. Everyone likes tea and soup.'

Myrtle examined the old woman carefully. She was sure she was a fair folk woman, and not some witch or hag in disguise. And she was living just inside the Silver Woods, where no darkling would ever live. But she was living dangerously close to the border between fair and dark, right on the border itself.

Though the soft light and warmth of the house made for a too-relaxing effect, yet Myrtle was not so wooed by comfort that she could not rouse herself, now that her overwhelming need for food and sleep had been satisfied. She drew upon her years of study and focused her senses on the old woman to discern what she was, and why she was keeping Myrtle confined.

She smelt of... what was it... fungi? Not in a bad way, but in a way that would suggest she held a good deal of knowledge regarding them, and perhaps ate a lot of them. She concentrated on the taste in her mouth that lingered after speaking with the woman. It was not an unpleasant taste, just too sweet. But there was something surrounding the woman which Myrtle felt in her own body and mind as she concentrated hard. There was sadness. Loss.

'You're lonely,' Myrtle said. 'You've lost someone.'

'My husband,' the fairy admitted. 'Since he's been gone, I've been so alone. I only want to give tea and soup. He did so like my soup.'

'And how long do you keep folk who fall into here?' Myrtle probed. 'When do they go their way again?'

'When a new friend drops in.'

'And how often does that happen?'

She shrugged and smiled sadly. 'Not often enough.'

'Did your husband die?'

She shook her head. '*She* took him.'

'She?'

The old woman shook her head. 'Not good to speak bad names.'

'Whisper it to me.' Myrtle bent down in a listening attitude, as though to a child.

'*Dame Deathcap* we call her.'

'I really am sorry that this Dame Deathcap took your husband, and I would advise you to report it to someone who can help, but I cannot stay here and keep you company. I *must* find my friends.'

'Better stay here and have some tea,' the old woman advised, smiling her grandmotherly smile and nudging the cup towards Myrtle. The smell was delightful and suddenly Myrtle felt very thirsty.

'Sit and drink,' urged the fairy, with that mix of sorrow and softness in her eyes and voice. 'Have some soup.' She turned away to the fire and ladled something hot into a bowl.

'More mushroom soup,' said Myrtle, looking down at the bowl set before her, and half sinking onto the stool that she might give in to the delights of it. But something about the soup jolted her upright again. 'Merciful Mushrooms!' she cried. 'I had almost forgotten! Will you stop trying to make me forget!'

'Not merciful mushrooms,' said the old woman. 'They are good for sickness. Not for soup.'

'Do you have some merciful mushrooms?' Myrtle demanded, stepping away from the table to better resist the temptation to sit and forget the outside world.

'Of course. I have every kind of mushroom. It is my work.'

‘Of course,’ echoed Myrtle, wondering why she had not realised that she was talking to a mushroom fairy. ‘Oh, there are so many questions I should like to ask you!’

‘Then sit and ask!’ said the fairy, looking delighted, and gesturing at the food.

‘I can’t!’ Another lost opportunity for her research! It was too bad! But the dragon – she must get back to him quickly and find Rue.

‘If you show me the way out,’ said Myrtle, ‘and give me merciful mushrooms, enough to counter the poison of two swamp toads, I will bring your case before the Green Lady, for I am on my way to find her. I promise.’

The fairy looked up sharply. A promise was a very powerful thing.

‘How are you able to go before the Green Lady? What powers do you have? You are but a mortal.’ She scrunched up her shiny, black eyes to peer more closely at Myrtle. ‘Though you have fae in your bloodline.’

‘I do?’ This pleased Myrtle, who had always suspected that it was so, and explained why she was not content to remain in a typical mortal domestic life. ‘What kind of fae?’

The old woman considered her further. ‘I cannot say,’ she said at last. ‘Not a mushroom fairy. Nor anything of the woodlands.’

‘I’m a Godmother,’ she told the woman. ‘From Highbury, over the border.’

‘A real one?’ There was a hopeful lilt.

‘Well... in training.’

‘Oh. So, you’ve no power of your own.’

‘No, but we have the goodwill of the Green Lady as our patroness. And there is an old agreement between Highbury and the Green Man.’

‘That is true,’ said the fairy slowly.

Myrtle could feel that as the old woman released her application of charm in the form of hospitality over her, it freed her mind to think more clearly, more rationally, more like herself. She would not lose this gain.

‘In the name of the Green Lady, I ask that you assist me and send me on my way, and I do promise to bring the theft of your husband before her. I wonder you have not done so yourself.’

‘None can reach the Green Lady’s palace unless the path is shown them,’ said the fairy sadly. ‘But you may have a claim to see it, if you really are a Godmother.’ She considered Myrtle for some moments. ‘What size being was it that ate the toads?’ she said at last.

‘About so high.’ Myrtle put a hand to a little below her hip.

‘Mortal? If it be mortal it shall be dead by now. No mortal can withstand two swamp toads.’

‘Dragon.’

‘Dragon!’ The fairy shrank back. ‘What are thee, a witch?’

‘Why does everyone assume that because I travel with a dragon, I must be a witch?’

‘None but a witch would harbour a dragon!’

‘Well, it’s a very young dragon. I think. I’m not quite sure what he is. But whatever he is, he needs help!’

Myrtle’s mounting frustration caused her blue eyes to blaze and one of her famous glares to fly out. The fairy shrank farther back, until the width of the whole room was almost between them.

‘Now I think I know what bloodline it is you hold,’ she said.

‘And what is that?’

But she only shook her head and murmured, ‘Tis not for me to say. Names are binding things.’

‘Well, are we agreed?’ Myrtle pressed, realising that she still had not yet had the binding word of agreement.

‘I agree,’ said the fairy resignedly. ‘Though it may be many moons till I have another guest.’ She sighed heavily. ‘Follow me.’ She turned to open a door in the wall that was not there until she touched it. Myrtle blinked in surprise and made a note to herself to remember that in Faerie a room without doors did not necessarily mean there were no doors. An old children’s riddle came to her mind: *What do you call a room without doors? A mushroom!*

Down a passage of earthen walls Myrtle followed until a staircase of compacted earth appeared and they climbed up and up, winding round to come out into a moonlit glade, very close to the pair of birch trees that marked the entrance of the woods. Though Myrtle could not see the hole in the ground that had caught her, she knew it lay just before the trees.

‘It’s night-time,’ said Myrtle in dismay. ‘I was down there for hours!’ Then she noticed the crescent shape of the moon, which was so much bigger and brighter and bluer in Faerie than in England. ‘The moon had not waxed so far on the day I fell into your house!’ she exclaimed.

‘No. Nor is that a waxing moon, ’tis waning.’

Myrtle stood staring up at the moon, appalled at the realisation that what had felt like a few hours under the charm of the old woman had been days!

‘I did not mean for you to sleep so long,’ the fairy said apologetically. ‘I forget what effect my tea has on mortals who have never tasted it.’

‘But he will be dead by now! What have you done?’ She turned angrily to the mushroom fairy who had lost her such precious time, but she was gone. ‘Wait! The merciful mushrooms! You promised!’

The moon seemed to throw a little ray of blue light on something at Myrtle’s feet. She bent down and opened the gossamer-thin fabric. She could see nothing inside, but when she refolded the package, the shape of its invisible contents were felt. Three small invisible mushrooms were parcelled up for her, and she put them into her pocket. The body of the dragon was nowhere to be seen. She sensed the air, trying to discern his odd metallic smell. But he had left too long ago for his scent to be picked up without the enhancement of Dust.

Where would she go now? How would she find him? She could not go back into the marshes; she must continue through the Silver Woods and regain the path through the Green Lady’s lands. But she walked on with a sinking heart, feeling she had failed miserably in her quest, almost as soon as she had begun it.

ON THE WATCH

Now that the rain clouds had cleared away, and the moon was high, Master Knightley considered the darkling bridge had faded enough to be safe. Trolls hated the light of a full moon, and though it was but a small snow moon, it was bright enough to keep them at bay. He was not sorry to turn for home and the comforts of getting warm and dry.

He did not notice what was happening on the bank on the side of Faerie, for he had moved too far away to see. He did not notice that the rain clouds had moved aside in a direct line above a figure – a figure riding steadily towards the river. A rider, so set about with silver charms and bells on his mount that all made way before him, be they briar or sprite or imp or stone. The moon lent an obliging light to the rider's path, whose fine, black stallion, with its tinkling silver harness, cantered along with an easy stride as though it gave no heed to the cold of the night and the weight of the man on its back. The moon fairly smiled, and the stars winked and glowed.

Across the ghostly bridge they trotted, neither rider nor mount showing any fear, but only an eagerness to reach the other side.

Once the ground of Merrie Old England had been gained, the rider gave a shout of joy, a shout that rippled and danced through the night air. Had Master Knightley not retained the wax plugs in his ear, to deafen any troll-lure, he would have run back to see who had made the shout. But Master Knightley continued his weary journey home, and the rider on the fine black horse continued on his merry way.

The nocturnal sprites, who rode the backs of owls and bats for sport, looked down upon the magnificent horse below, knowing that there was a rare trace of unicorn in its bloodline which gave it such grace. Only a wealthy rider could afford such a horse. Only fae royalty, or powerful enchanter, or dread sorcerer could own such a creature.

The brownies busy gathering cooking herbs, stooping beneath the full moon in search of their desired plants, watched the horse and his rider pass by, and knew that he came from a house too large for a brownie to be comfortable in.

The orchard elves dancing in a little fairy ring of their own making, glanced up at the confident hooves that caused the ground to vibrate beneath their feet. The rider on the horse, with his full-flowing cape and his fine boots and elegant attire, looked like a man who would enjoy dancing himself. But he was too intent on his journey to stop just now. Such a fragrance of Faerie was in his wake, that he must be some knight or courtier of the queen. Surely, he was no mere mortal who preferred the draughty halls and screeching instruments for dancing – odd creatures

that mortals were. They turned away and resumed their own pleasure and left the man on his fae horse to pursue his.



Emma watched on the grandfather clock in the hall all morning. She even asked the housekeeper if the clock had been wound that week and was assured that it had. She almost sent word to Harriet to ask her to record the time of the clock at the school, so she could compare them, for the cuckoo bird that called out the hour kept perfect time, drawing on the light and the sun and moon and whatever manner of natural signs these creatures used. But she restrained herself, and tried to leave off clock-watching, and keep busy in her chamber with altering the arrangement of her plaits and ringlets several times over and changing one gown for another so she should know exactly what she ought to wear when *he* called.

They expected Frank Charmall at Randalls by mid-afternoon. She calculated that Master Weston would bring him to Hartfield the following morning, for Master Weston had promised to bring him soon after his arrival and no one was as prompt in bringing people together as Master Weston.

She did not need to enquire of the clock what time it was now, for she could see from her window that the sun stood nearly directly overhead, and thus it was approaching noon. Only noon. So many hours yet to while away until *he* came into Highbury. Though she had no expectation of seeing him that day, still it was pleasant to think of him being but half a mile away at Randalls. It was a pleasure to think of Master and Mistress Weston's happiness in receiving him, so long had they waited for his visit, and so many disappointments had they endured in his visit being delayed.

She smiled at herself for her eagerness, but this visit had been long talked of and long imagined. She had heard so much of Frank Charmall from his proud father. She agreed that Frank must have excellent manners and handsome looks. She heard of how his aunt, who had raised him and given him her family name, had lavished all the best Faerie gifts upon him as her adopted son and heir. Perhaps she had kept him so close by her all these years precisely because he was so remarkable, so very essential to her happiness.

No doubt his aunt had also procured the services of a Godmother to gain him an excellent match, that he might marry a young lady of wealth and property and handsome looks and a pleasant temper and excellent manners... and this was what made Emma smile to herself, as she tried one ribbon after another against her hair. She smiled at her own reflection, for in it she saw exactly the kind of young lady that Frank Charmall's Godmother, assuming he had one, might pick out for him.

All thoughts of devoting herself to training as a Godmother had dimmed since her disastrous matchmaking attempt with Harriet. Perhaps she ought to abandon the idea altogether; perhaps she really was more suited to marriage. Perhaps Frank Charmall was exactly the kind of young man she would be pleased with. These were all agreeable thoughts to cheer a dull February day and weaken the worries that haunted Highbury in these times.

She put aside her ribbons, for Papa would want his early luncheon of a little bowl of soup at half-past twelve. As she moved across the room, her eyes fell upon the book of proverbs Mother Goodword had given her. She had always disliked that book. She would send it back the moment Mother Goodword returned. The book lay open and the gilding of the illumination drew her eye.

'She who would see must look,' Emma read aloud. 'That kind of nonsense is precisely why I do not enjoy reading you.'

'Charm is a veil to be drawn aside. Why so? I am very fond of charm. It makes things palatable that might not be otherwise. I disagree with you, you proverbial author. Why can't you tell me something useful for a change? Tell me if I am to be a Godmother, or if I am to marry a suitable match. Someone young and handsome and, yes, *charming*.

'Love may speak with a sword, and deceit may speak with a kiss. How can love speak with a sword? That sounds rather violent. And you have not answered my question.

'Better a dish of gruel with truth, than a platter of sweetmeats with deceit. That at least is logical, but it has no application to me. That is quite enough proverbs for one day.'

The clock struck twelve as she passed through the hall; she opened the parlour door and saw two gentlemen sitting with her father – Master Weston *and his son*. They had been arrived only a few minutes; Master Weston had scarcely finished his explanation of Frank's being a day before his time, having ridden through the night in his eagerness to reach them. Her father was yet in the midst of his very civil welcome and exclaiming that Master Weston should have brought his son by way of the ancient hall that he might receive the blessing of the Green Man, when Emma appeared, to have her share of surprise introduction and pleasure.

A RIVAL

Rue was having a delightful time! She skipped and whirled and wove and clapped and made figures of eight, gliding from one circle to another, catching hold of her fellow dancers' hands. She laughed with the exuberance of it all – the pipes and the drums and the moonlight and the feeling that this movement of circling and joining and merging and beginning all over again was the real meaning of life and nothing else mattered!

But a rupture came. Something dark and lumbering came to the edge of the fairy ring, with a smell of vileness and poison. Something with glowing red eyes and a fierce armoured body and tail. It crashed through the bushes making hideous growls and moans, and every fae dancer shouted or screamed and was gone – the fairy ring broken up and scattered.

Rue stood, caught in a posture of spinning round with her vanished partner, her arms outstretched and one foot lifted. She heard the braying of a terrified donkey and turned to see a tall young man with curly hair charging away into the trees. She turned back to see what the monster was – the terrible beast that had slumped in the middle of what had been her dancing ring. The enchantment was still heavy on her; she felt as though she were waking up out of a deep and vivid dream, but she could not quite get her bearings, could not quite remember where she was and why she felt so giddy. She thought the fallen monster looked like a small, blue dragon.



Her maid far longer than usual at her beauty preparations. Her hair was cut by its usual six inches, as it must be every week, or it would become unmanageable in weight and length. The braids must be more refined in their arrangement that evening, and her hair curled at the front in the new fashion she had heard of from her sister in London. She must not look provincial before Frank Charmall, who was the height of elegance and style.

Perhaps he put a little too much emphasis on his looks, she could not deny it, for he had only been in Highbury three days and then he must ride off all the way into town for a haircut. But Emma had not much experience of young men of fashion; perhaps this was the way with all of them. It did seem rather a vain thing to do. Even Master Weston had laughed and called his son a coxcomb for his action, but Master Knightley had not laughed when he called him a trifling, silly fellow, on hearing where Frank Charmall had gone.

But then, Master Knightley thought that tonight's dinner party at the Coles' was a trifling, silly thing. The whole village under threat of being overrun by darklings, and folk were eating and drinking and dancing as if nothing were amiss. But Emma

reminded him that the village did not know quite how much danger they were in, they only knew that things had not been as they ought for some months. They knew nothing of Master Knightley guarding the bridge at night, driving back foul creatures with the threat of the family sword. She had not asked if he had actually *killed* anything with it, she would rather not know. But he had let something slip about trolls' necks being very thick.

She shuddered at such a thought and forced her mind back to more agreeable things. Frank Charmall would not need to slay a troll with a sword, no doubt he could charm it to do whatever he wished. She had never met a man with more charm than he, and it was not the shallow charm of a Master Elftyn, it was the elegant charm that a man who had probably danced at the Faerie court, and moved among Faerie nobility gained.

She smiled with pleasure to think of dancing in Faerie. Dinner at the Coles' seemed very prosaic by contrast. When Master Knightley that morning had strongly expressed his distaste of dining out at such a time, she had reminded him that a gathering of so many of their neighbours in one place was an excellent opportunity to watch and listen and look for clues. Their thief might well be among the guests. Thus she persuaded both him and herself that it was for a noble cause she was attending this evening's dinner. And truly, it was something of a sacrifice to her, for the Coles were merely a rich mercantile family, they had not a trace of nobility or good family blood in them. Not a trace. She was condescending indeed to agree to attend tonight, but it was all in a vital cause. And if Master Charmall's presence brought a good deal of pleasure to her sacrifice, well, she could not help that.

How very attentive to herself Frank Charmall had been since his arrival, spending the whole of Thursday with herself and Mistress Weston, being delighted in their company and in being shown all around Highbury. How enjoyable it was to have a handsome young gentleman to walk about with, speaking with such courtesy and gallantry; none of the overblown compliments of the likes of Master Elftyn, but the wit and information of a refined mind. Yes, Frank Charmall had fulfilled all her hopes and expectations. All Godmothering nonsense fell by the wayside for now.

She did still harbour some pleasant images of herself as a powerful Godmother, moving amongst royalty and nobility with wisdom and grace, dispensing favours and blessings on the worthy, yet the reality of the business had proved to be rather tedious and disappointing. All that practising of the senses; all that boring meditation; the application of one's time and mental energies on words and reading and composing, when she would sooner be reading a good story or chatting comfortably with friends. No. It seemed quite clear at that moment that Godmothering and matchmaking might not be her destiny. Her thoughts returned to Frank Charmall with a little smile. Could it be that she was destined for the common course of marriage after all?

'A Emma, my dear, how pretty you look. How beautiful your dress is. You looked just like your poor dear mama as you came in just then.'

'Thank you, papa,' said Emma, coming into the drawing room where her father sat, readying himself for his evening with Dame Baytes. Emma liked to hear about her mother.

'You have the same way of walking and holding your head,' her father said. 'She was so elegant, and pretty, and very clever. You are just like her, my dear, in fact you are prettier.' His admiration ended in a sigh as his gaze rested upon Emma's hair.

‘Dame Baytes will be here any moment,’ Emma said, diverting her father’s attention elsewhere. ‘So, I will put the game table by the fireside that you may sit there after supper and play a while.’

‘And you will not stay late, Emma. You will be very tired if they keep you there too long after supper. You will come home early.’

‘Now, Papa, we have discussed all that. I shall not break up the party too early, it would be not be courteous. I am sure it will not be too late an evening.’

Master Woodhouse was not happy with this reply. ‘You must not eat too much, my dear, other people’s cooks are not like Serle, they do dreadful things to the food. They overcook things or undercook things, or make them too rich. You are not used to rich, undercooked dishes, my dear. You had better not eat anything, but come home and have Serle make you something when you get in.’

‘My dear Papa, not for the world would I have Serle kept up to cook for me at such an hour. And I assure you I shall be very discerning in what I eat. I promise not to overindulge in rich dishes. There, will you be easy now?’

‘And you will not dance? Dancing after supper is a dangerous thing to do. The constitution must rest after supper. Dancing is the very worst thing one can do, it can give shocking pains in the side and do all manner of harm.’

‘I do not think the Coles have the room for dancing, Papa. I understand that music shall be the source of entertainment after supper. There is nothing so pleasant as sitting listening to gentle music after supper, is there?’

‘So long as you do not sit in a draught. Be sure to sit by the fire, and keep your shawl on, my dear.’

Emma agreed to everything and was glad when the attention was turned from herself by the arrival of old Dame Baytes, who had come to keep Master Woodhouse company for the evening.

Mistress Baytes and Jane Fairfayce were to be at the evening party later, though not at the dinner. The dinner was for the higher rank of guests, while those of the lower rank in Highbury were to come later. Emma quite approved of this; it was just as it ought to be.

Only one thing marred her prospects of happiness that evening, and that was the knowledge that Maid Fairfayce would be present after dinner, thus Emma would not be the only young lady to be asked to please the party with music.

Emma was always ready to sing and play when required, but she had only given her playing a moderate amount of practise; she had never felt induced to master it. Jane Fairfayce, however, was an excellent musician, having been taught by the best masters as she grew up in the colonel’s household. And Jane was perhaps just as pleasing to look on at the instrument as Emma herself was. But she brushed these little disagreeable ideas aside. She was going to enjoy her evening, for it was a source of great pleasure to be going among friends, especially in these long, dark, wintry nights.

But was not yesterday the first day of spring, being Valentyne’s Day? That was a cheering thought – the day when it was said that all the birds choose their mates and build their nests together. The day when it was said that romance and true love were sent out by the West Wind to blow softly through the windows of those destined to fall in love. And with spring coming, it would not be long before Midsummer was come again.

She’d had no Valentyne poem or song sent to herself, nor had she expected or desired one, but had not she spent part of yesterday in the company of a most charming man? Should she be inclined to such sweet and foolish nonsense as Valentyne riddles and rhymes, there was only one man in the world that she could

imagine, with any pleasure, sending her such a token.

The carriage was announced, and all Emma's amusing thoughts were gathered up with the train of her gown. Not even the changeable weather outside that threatened to rain or hail on her new gown should spoil her evening. She was in a mind for the business of observation, but she was also in a mind to be happy.

The evening did not disappoint. The assembly was numerous for little Highbury, but only a select party were present, other guests of lesser rank would come later in the evening. The Coxes were painfully vulgar, to be sure, and the Gilberts, cousins of the Coles, were shabbily dressed, which Emma considered quite an insult to their hosts and to herself as their highest-ranking guest. People ought not to accept invitations only to turn up in their second-best clothes; she hardly knew which was worse, the showiness of the Coxes with their ribbons, feathers and frills, or the underwhelming drabness of the Gilberts. She smoothed down the skirt of her own elegant gown and lightly touched her crown of braids that needed no feathers or baubles and was glad that no one could accuse her of either ill.

Emma's satisfaction was no less diminished at dinner. The table was well laid, the dishes plentiful, and Emma had the due deference of the prominent seat at the table and the pleasure of having Frank Charmall placed beside her. All was as she had hoped, and if Mistress Cole would but modulate her country accent, Emma could quite forget that she had demeaned herself to actually dine with a family of the class of trade.

There was a good deal of talk at the table of the odd goings-on in Highbury, and the usual wonderings over what had happened to Mother Goodword, who had been a pillar of Highbury society for as long as anyone could remember. Now it would seem that her senior students were likewise vanishing one by one from the village. There were claims of sightings of dragons and roamers and witches, though some of these sightings were dubious. Emma was glad her father had not been inclined to attend the dinner; he would have been horribly alarmed at such talk.

There was also much talk at the table of something concerning Jane Fairfayce. It would seem she had received an expensive and unexpected gift the previous day – that of a musical instrument, a costly spinet no less. The consensus was that it must have been a gift from her guardians the colonel and his wife, for who else was connected to the family who had the means and desire of giving such a luxurious present? Emma enjoyed listening to the gossip flitting across the table like a springtime sprite, bright and happy.

But a fanciful thought was forming in her own mind regarding the mystery of Jane Fairfayce's gift. She recalled her own romantic notion of Jane and Master Dixon. If he were a secret admirer, if Emma's fancy of forbidden love between them were true, then would this not be the very thing a wealthy, secret admirer would do?

When the lady of this romantic speculation came in after dinner, Emma observed her whenever the subject of the musical instrument was mentioned. There was no doubt about it, Jane Fairfayce was most uncomfortable on the subject. She flushed and a spark of agitation would fly out of the corner of her eye, which none but a close observer would notice. This was confirmation to Emma's suspicions, and the sad and romantic tale of lost love was fixed more firmly in her mind, especially as Frank Charmall had related a story at dinner of Master Dixon once saving Jane's life during a boating party, by catching her when she almost fell

overboard, having been lured by the sight of a mermaid. Emma could see it all – the gratitude of Jane to the man who had rescued her, the passion of the young man who had rushed to her rescue, highly attuned to any danger which threatened her, and the agony of their love which could never be acknowledged.

Harriet came in with the evening guests, and Emma was pleased to see how pretty she looked. What a pity Emma's hopes for a match between Harriet and Master Elftyn had failed. Harriet looked perfect for a romantic heroine, though she was too rosy cheeked and smiling for a pining heroine. Jane Fairfayce, however, was exactly as a lovelorn heroine ought to look. She had just the kind of delicate features a sorrowing maiden ought to have, and when she took her turn at the Cole's magnificent, gleaming instrument to play and sing, her choice of music was perfectly elegiac and melancholy. Yes indeed. Jane Fairfayce was the perfect heroine of a story of lost love.

Thinking of this helped Emma to like a little more, even though she had quite stolen the praise and admiration of the room by her superior musical performance. But Mistress Weston, coming to sit beside Emma while Jane played, soon ruptured Emma's mood of tolerance.

'How well Mistress Cole has arranged everything,' Mistress Weston began.

'They must have procured very expensive charms from town,' Emma agreed. It had occurred to her more than once that evening that the Coles' abundance of charms might not be due to their wealth, it could be due to their possession of their own source of magic...

'I have just heard something interesting,' said Mistress Weston.

'Pray do tell. Though if it be about the mysterious instrument, I have heard of it already.'

'It is not the instrument. I have just heard that Master Knightley sent his carriage to bring Mistress Baytes and Jane Fairfayce to this evening's gathering.'

'And why should that interest or surprise you? It is just the sort of kindness I would expect from Master Knightley.'

'I disagree. I think it more than a neighbourly act of kindness. I have been observing our friend Master Knightley this evening and I believe his motives were of a deeper source than his usual generous spirit.'

'You speak in riddles, Mistress Weston,' said Emma lightly, but feeling a twinge of alarm, though she could not say why.

'In short,' said Mistress Weston, her voice low, as one who shares a great secret, 'I have made a match between Master Knightley and Jane Fairfayce. See the consequence of keeping you company What do you say to it?'

'Master Knightley and Jane Fairfayce!' Emma rounded on her friend with utter amazement. 'Dear Mistress Weston, how could you think of such a thing?'

But Mistress Weston, it seemed, had thought considerably on the matter, and could think nothing more reasonable than that Master Knightley could wish for an elegant young mistress of Donwell to brighten the long, winter evenings with music and companionship. 'What could be more fitting? If Jane Fairfayce had a Fairy Godmother, I would consider Master Knightley the perfect match for her. He would give her the comfortable home and fortune she so desperately needs, while appreciating her talents as no other man could. Why, I think it a *perfect* match.'

Emma could hardly keep her voice steady as she said, 'My dear Mistress Weston, do *not* take to matchmaking. You do it very ill. Jane Fairfayce mistress of Donwell! Oh, no – every feeling revolts!'

But Mistress Weston was not so easily dissuaded, even considering that the surprise gift of the instrument that Jane had received might well be Master

Knightley's doing.

Emma's mind and heart protested loudly in time to the quick beat of the passionate duet Jane Fairfayce was now playing with Frank Charmall.

When Master Knightley took Mistress Weston's place beside Emma, she took the opportunity of watching him as they conversed. There was no doubt that he enjoyed the music, but was it merely the music he admired, or did his eyes appreciate the beauty of the musician also?

The song ended, and Frank Charmall was urging Jane to sing another with him, placing a song sheet before her which made her flush and look discomposed as she shook her head and tried to push the song away.

Master Knightley's anger flared up. 'That fellow,' said he indignantly, 'thinks nothing but showing off his own voice.' He stood up, and as Mistress Baytes passed by, he touched her arm to say, 'Mistress Baytes, are you mad to let your niece sing herself hoarse in this manner? Go and interfere. They have no mercy on her.'

Mistress Baytes hurried to comply. Emma's eye was caught by Mistress Weston, who gave her a knowing look, which Emma knew to mean – *See what concern he shows for her? See what regard he has for her health? Such consideration, such care, such symptoms of love.*

All the pleasure of the evening was quite emptied away in this horrible moment of unwonted speculation. But Emma was not accustomed to linger in unpleasant thoughts, so she shook them off resolutely. Mistress Weston was wrong, quite wrong. *Impossible!*

It was Mistress Weston who next took her turn at the instrument, to play a couple of dancing melodies, that those who wished to might enjoy one or two impromptu dances. Emma watched Master Knightley carefully, an apprehension seizing her that he might ask Jane Fairfayce to dance; but to her relief he did not, and Emma was free to enjoy the dancing, choosing the first piece of music for Mistress Weston to play, and firmly putting aside the song which Jane had been rescued from performing – a very sentimental song of secret love and a pining lover, she certainly would not dance to *that*. In fact, she detested the thought of any love songs at that moment in time; not even Frank Charmall's attentions could induce her to anything other than an old country song about the coming of summer. And may it come quickly, that Jane Fairfayce's visit might be ended and she be safely away working as a governess far from Donwell. Very far!

A DELIGHTFUL PERSUASION

It took Rue some time to regain her sense of self. Dancing in a fairy ring was rather like any other excess of pleasure, there was a consequence to suffer afterwards. She felt as though she had been dancing for days, and dimly realised that likely she had. Every muscle in her body ached, her mouth was parched, and she was ravenous. She was also exhausted. All she could think about was the necessity of finding water and food and somewhere to sleep. She was sure there was something else very important, perhaps more important than anything else, but whatever it was it must wait until she at least had slaked her thirst, or she would surely perish right there in the little glen.

Her dazed and reeling mind was aware of something glimmering just ahead of her: a fairy light. Perhaps a good fairy had come to help her? The small luminous figure flew ahead of her, beckoning her to follow. Some blurry, blinding steps later Rue sank to the ground and plunged her whole face into a pool fed by a trickling brook.

‘Thank you, kind spirit,’ she breathed out as she rolled onto her back, feeling life returning to her body and some clarity to her dance-addled mind.

The kindly spirit hovered just beyond the direct line of Rue’s vision, as though waiting for her, but Rue felt content to lie there, deciding that a good long nap would be the next requirement.

‘Ow!’ What was that? Something had pinched her on the arm, and pinched hard! She sat up, looking to see who her assailant was – the kindly fairy was not so kindly as she’d thought!

‘Get up!’ the fairy said from within the haze of light she wrapped herself in.

‘But I’m so sleepy—’

‘You’re so lazy! Like all mortal maidens, now up! You got yourself into this mess, don’t expect me to unravel it all for you.’

‘What mess?’ Rue’s mind felt fuzzy and thick. She couldn’t quite recall why she was in Faerie. Something about a cat? No, a dog... no, a frog, yes, a frog, but what was it about the frog—?

‘The frog!’ she cried, as the confusion in her mind cleared by degrees. ‘Master Smith is a frog! And...’ what else was there? A horse? Or a donkey? – ‘Ben! Where is he? He ran home, but he ran home as Jack, but where is Jack?’

It all came back to her in a sickening wave. But there was something else, what was it?

A noise – half moan, half growl came from somewhere close by. Not an animal growl, nor a human one. ‘A dragon! It was Myrtle’s dragon that broke up the dancing!’ Rue scrambled to her feet and ran towards the groaning noise.

‘Stay back,’ ordered the fairy, blocking Rue from getting any closer. ‘He’s poisonous.’

‘No, it’s only a baby,’ argued Rue, trying to dodge the fairy who gave her a powerful shove for her trouble. ‘Hey! Kindly stop pinching and pushing me about!’

‘He’s dangerous,’ The fairy was right in Rue’s face, and though the fairy kept her shape as a small, gleaming cloud, Rue could see a suggestion of a pair of glaring eyes in line with her own.

‘I tell you it’s a baby dragon, and it has no fire.’

‘And I tell *you* he’s a young margool who has eaten poison, and his breath will *kill* you if you get too close.’

‘Poison?’ Rue looked past the fairy’s bright cloud, but did not move nearer the dragon. ‘Then we have to help him. Myrtle would be right upset if anything happens to it. She must have followed after me.’ A sudden thought struck her – ‘Oh, no! Myrtle! She’s not... the dragon hasn’t...?’

She could not say the dreadful words. She looked pleadingly at the fairy. ‘Have you seen the girl who was with the dragon? Tall. Black hair? Please, *please* say she’s alive!’

‘I have seen no girl save you,’ the fairy said, her tone dispassionate and matter of fact. ‘I was sent to recover the creature, before his poison destroys any fae under the protection of the Green Lady. Come. Follow me.’

‘Follow where? I must look for Jack and Myrtle, I can’t leave them behind—’

But there was a blinding light and a swirl of shapes and noise. When the light faded enough for Rue to uncover her eyes, she saw the forms of four white horses, with an open sleigh behind.

‘Hold on,’ the fairy said, as Rue was lifted into the air and deposited on the back of a horse, except now that she was close enough to touch it, it was not a horse at all, but some breed of fae creature with the head of a horse, a body like a large goat, and a tail like white trailing peacock feathers. More feathers fanned out either side of Rue as the creatures rose into the air. Rue had just time to glance behind her and see the dragon lying on the sleigh making puffs of a putrid orange colour, and then the treetops were suddenly beneath her feet and she held on tight to the creature’s mane and shrieked half with surprise, half with glee as they shot through the air.



I that when a mortal dances in Faerie, there must be dancing amongst the mortals they have left behind, for the spirit of dancing ripples through the unseen air. The brief hour of dancing at the Coles’ had been the beginning of an awakening of this desire, a desire which now waxed strong, and thus Emma and Frank Charmall stood in the draughty, empty ballroom of the Crown Inn and surveyed the space before them.

‘It is room enough for our purpose,’ said Frank decidedly. ‘A good ten couples can dance here comfortably.’

‘It is rather dull and dirty,’ Mistress Weston said, coming to stand beside Emma.

‘Nothing a few charms cannot dispel,’ said Frank Charmall.

‘We have no charms to spare in Highbury,’ said Emma.

‘Then I must ride back to Faerie and procure some,’ was the cheerful reply. Frank Charmall was not to be dissuaded on any point. He countered Mistress Weston’s concerns regarding the narrowness of the hall, the lack of room for a supper table – he laughed all apprehensions away. ‘If only we could cross into Faerie for our ball,’ was his only lament. ‘Then we should have a charming time of it. There is nothing like dancing in Faerie, how I wish I could take you there.’ This

last comment was to Emma.

‘And dance away all the days of our lives before we fairly got out again,’ replied Emma.

‘So much the better! What could be more enjoyable than an endless ball with those you like best to be with?’

Neither Mistress Weston nor Emma could help but smile at Frank’s effusion, it was most infectious, and Emma thought he was right; dancing endlessly with Frank Charmall sounded very pleasant indeed.

‘Be careful what charms you bring into Highbury,’ Emma warned. ‘Even small magic behaves in unpredictable ways at present. Things are out of balance.’

As though her words were some kind of off-balanced charm, Frank’s air and countenance suddenly altered. He shook his head a little, as though shaking off something binding his thoughts. His look of rapt attention was turned away from Emma, and instead he seemed to recall something important he had forgotten. He shook his head again and said, ‘Suppose I go and invite Mistress Baytes to join us, to give her opinion on the scheme?’

‘Send for Mistress Baytes?’ Emma marvelled. ‘You will get nothing to the purpose from Mistress Baytes.’

‘But she is so amusing!’ he argued. He had already taken a step towards the door.

‘Aye, do Frank,’ Master Weston decided the matter. ‘Go and fetch Mistress Baytes.’

Frank ran away and returned with Mistress Baytes and Maid Fairfayce. What did Frank Charmall find amusing in the company of Mistress Baytes, Emma wondered? He seemed to seek her out and call upon her a good deal. Whenever Emma met with Mistress Baytes, she was sure to hear of Master Charmall being so clever in repairing Dame Baytes spectacles, or Master Charmall being so kind as move the furniture that the new instrument might be better accommodated, or Master Charmall being so very obliging in running to the market because she happened to mention that Jane had run out of sealing wax.

Sometimes Emma wondered over the character of Frank Charmall – was a man who took pleasure in sitting a half hour or more of every day with Mistress Baytes the kind of man she had determined on as being an excellent match for herself? Did such freak humours counter the delights of a man who was in any other way nearly perfect, and so very ready to dance?

When she was with him, she had no qualms about him, but as soon as the Bayteses were in the same room, the feeling faded somehow. And now that she applied her mind in a more rational manner, she discerned her own foretelling gift stirring like a tiny bird stretching its wings. What was it she was discerning? It was a very disagreeable foretelling. It was a foretelling that this ball would not come to pass, but that Frank Charmall would soon be gone from them, and the cause of this interference was of a darkling source, though what it was she could not say.

What *was* going on? It was as though some swirl of true charm and some opposing force of resistance were at work in Frank – that was what her senses told her in that flash of foretelling. Something was not right. But what was it? Perhaps she must revive all her sensing practise and Godmothering lessons, and apply them to him, and try to discern his character in a more objective manner.



Master Knightley that his steward, William Larkins, did not want his master's sympathy over the disappearance of his son; he only wanted to be kept busy that he might not have to think of his loss for some part of the day. So Master Knightley kept him busy, thinking up extra tasks he could give his steward to do.

'I would appreciate you riding over to Kingston in the morning,' Master Knightley said, as his steward stood beside him at the massive oak table in Master Knightley's study. Plans and drawings covered the table, detailing all the ongoing projects on the estate. Both master and steward took great pleasure in looking over all the maps that showed every field, every fence, every gate and stream. They discussed drainage and crop rotation and yield and profit for long hours, and when they were done discussing the theory of their plans, they liked nothing better than to stride out among the very fields and paths in reality. But William Larkins' zeal for his work had lost all joy since Ben had gone missing.

'To the market?' Larkins replied vacantly. Where previously he would have stood in a jovial stance with his thumbs tucked into his belt, casting a satisfied eye over the plans, now his arms hung down limply, holding his hat between his hands.

'Have a look round at the yearlings, see if there's any fit to bring on for next year's ploughing.' Master Knightley did not need any new horses for next year's ploughing, nor did planning for next year's work seem important considering current events, but he knew how well Larkins liked to look round the market and discuss horses with the other stewards and breeders who gathered there on market day.

'Ben has a rare eye for a good horse,' said Larkins. 'Had a rare eye,' he self-corrected quietly.

Master Knightley could have kicked himself. He should have stayed away from the subject of horses; Ben did have a rare eye and hand for them. He changed the subject. 'Are there any sacks of apples left?' he asked.

Larkins shook his head. 'Sold the lot.'

'What about the cellar?'

'I put three sacks in the cellar for Mistress Hodges. I understand she's cooked up two bushels already in jams and tarts.'

'Then take what's left round to the Bayteses. Mistress Baytes mentioned she had nearly used up the stock sent at harvest, and her niece has a great liking for them.'

'As you like, sir.'

'And Larkins...'

'Yes, sir?'

'He will return. We will find him, or he will find his way back. He's too clever a lad not to find a way back.'

'That's what the missus says,' said William Larkins quietly, but his shoulders were bowed in sorrow as he left the study.

William Larkins took a lantern into the windowless cellar and filled a bushel-sized basket with apples, as directed. The last apple his hand reached for glowed soft and golden in the lamplight and bore a knot of twine about its woody stalk.

'Well, look at that,' murmured Larkins. 'The Last Apple. You should have been given to a maiden destined to marry before the next Last Apple falls. Well, the master has said where you're to go, so Lady Providence will have to do the rest. I'm not getting in the middle of any romancing nor matchmaking, I'll leave all that to the womenfolk and Godmothers.' And then he recalled Master Knightley's suggestion that Ben ought to have the apple to give to a sweetheart.

‘Ah, my poor lad,’ said Larkins sadly. ‘I should have given it to you. What would it matter if you chose a housemaid with no dowry instead of a dairy-mistress with six cows? What would any of that matter, when all that matters is you being home again.’ And he put the apple into the basket with a groan.

A GRIEVOUS BUSINESS

Nothing Myrtle had read in any books assisted her in dealing with the problems she was now enduring – the problem of sorrow.

She had thought life was populated with ideas and gathering interesting knowledge, while people were of secondary interest. But somehow that scaly, smoke-breathing, ruby-eyed little creature had unlocked a part of her heart that had lain asleep all her short life. Having no-one but her distant uncle in her childhood had caused her to do without friends and companions and feelings of affection. But without her realising it, she had grown very fond of loud, bright Rue and sweet little Harriet. They had shown her what it must be like to have real sisters. And in such a short time she had grown very fond of the dragon, or margool, or whatever it was. No one had ever needed her the way the dragon did.

But now all was lost. Her friends. Her dragon. She had allowed herself to be beguiled by the first fairy she met – oh, the shame of it – to be charmed into forgetfulness by the base comforts of food and sleep! All that study had served her no purpose when she had been put to the first test.

Clearly Faerie was not a place to understand by reading books. It was a bit like people and dragons – you thought you knew what they were like by studying them, but when you encountered them, they were far more complex and surprising than you could ever have imagined.

And now she marched on through the Silver Woods, feeling a sense of urgency in reaching someone wiser than her – the Green Lady – and hoping with all her soul that she would find Rue and the dragon, and pick up one of the enchanted paths to the palace.

On she walked, her tall figure moving between the slender silvery trees. More thoughts troubled her about what she would do if she failed to graduate, a scenario that looked likely in the current dire circumstances. She would have to go home to her uncle, who would be annoyed with her failure. But no, he would not feel so much emotion as annoyance, he would simply regard her as one would regard an irritating insect and brush her aside. She had nothing to go back to at his house. She would be nothing more than his housekeeper, a ghostly housekeeper, wandering about the great sprawling old manor where no one visited, speaking to no one, or wandering alone about the bleak moorlands beyond.

She trudged on, not noticing that whenever she grew thirsty a trickle of a brook would appear, and whenever she grew hungry an obliging bush laden with berries would catch her eye, or a neat mound of nuts would sit beneath a tree just waiting to be cracked open with a stone. She walked and ate and slept, and wondered that the wood should be so very long, it had not looked so far on the map. Why could she not find a path to take her quickly to the palace? The Silver Woods were supposed to hold several of the enchanted shortcuts. It was as though she were being kept

here.

Though her heart was heavy and troubled while awake, yet she slept remarkably well, better than she had ever slept before. But then she did not see the fairies who moved invisibly about her, providing piles of nuts and sprinkling sleep-dust on her eyes when she lay down. She was too deep in her own sorrow to assert her senses, for if she had, she would have smelled the sweet honeysuckle scent that signified friendly spirits all around her.

But Myrtle only walked and mourned and slept and woke to walk and feel sad again until she came to the end of searching her own heart, which corresponded exactly with reaching the end of the Silver Woods.

The last pair of silver birches stood as a gateway. The branches made a door. They drew back their arms to permit her to see what lay beyond. A crossroads lay before her. It was time to choose.



‘A Harriet’s voice lacked the enthusiasm that might be expected. But Emma understood why. It was an odd time to be thinking of balls. Yet the idea of it had come so strongly upon them all, as though a mortal from among them had been dancing in a Faerie ring, compelling them all to dance. And yet, to have some pleasant thing to dwell upon was a very great relief to her beleaguered spirits.

‘And Master Frank Charmall has asked you to open it with him. I wonder if anyone will ask me to dance.’

‘How can you doubt it?’ replied Emma. ‘We have planned the couples carefully to ensure a pleasant gentleman for every lady. No one need sit out at our little ball if they do not choose to.’

‘Shall you wear your new gown?’

‘I shall. And you must wear your new pink one.’

Harriet looked a little stricken as she said, ‘But I wore the pink when I visited the Martins...’

It was never a good sign when Harriet trailed away mid-sentence after mentioning the Martins, so Emma hurried to say, ‘Perhaps your blue, then. The blue would do very well for a ball. You can borrow my blue-tasselled shawl.’

‘Could I? You are very good to me.’

‘And we could make a garland of camellias for you hair,’ Emma added, wishing to encourage Harriet in happier thoughts than that of missing her friends. She desired to fix her own thoughts on pleasant things, that she might not be dwelling on the fear that Master Knightley might be overrun by a violent goblin horde or an offended troll. Neither did she wish to think of what her father would do if he heard of such matters.

It would do no good to let herself be consumed by worries. She would not be fit for caring for her father if she were. She would not be able to keep a clear head in looking for clues as to the thief if she allowed her fears to rule her. It was necessary to maintain some pleasant occupation to balance out the unpleasant. And Frank Charmall’s attentions were very pleasant indeed. And yet... what was the underlying niggles she felt when she was with him at times? The feeling that his attentions, his growing interest in her, his preoccupation with her was somehow off-balance? She could not put her finger on it. And she had another unpleasant feeling that she was trying to ignore – she’d had a foretelling that this ball would not come

to pass.

‘Let’s walk about the gardens and pick the camellias,’ she suggested. ‘We shall put them in water in the buttery to stay cool and fresh ready for a headdress fit for a country ball.’

Harriet summoned up a smile of agreement, and the camellias were gathered.

But a note from Randalls shattered all happy plans next morning at breakfast.

‘What is it, my dear?’ her father asked, peering down the table over his slice of dry toast. ‘I hope it is not disagreeable news, for you look vexed.’

‘Oh dear. It is from Mistress Weston. Frank Charmall has been called home by his aunt. He must leave immediately.’

‘But why should that distress you, my dear? I daresay he will be back again soon. I hope he goes by carriage. It is too cold for horseback riding.’

‘It is distressing, Papa, because it means that our plans for the ball are quite ruined.’ Emma almost threw down the note in her disappointment. ‘I knew it would be so.’

‘I am sorry for anything that causes you vexation, Emma, but I never really thought this plan a good one. A ball in winter is a dreadful recipe for a cold. All that heat from dancing, then to afterwards go out into the cold night air. It is better that it should be cancelled. I am sure it is for the best. It is shocking to have you disappointed, but you will be safer at home.’

Master Woodhouse seemed to enjoy his toast with more relish now the disagreeable plan for the ball had been brought to naught. Emma saw no point in arguing her case and stifled a sigh. It was too bad. She picked up the wretched note and read it more carefully, having only scanned it in haste the first time. It indicated that Frank Charmall would call upon her to say farewell. When breakfast was concluded she settled her father in his usual morning chair and betook herself to the Great Hall, giving word to the butler that she would be there should any visitor call for her.

She considered her reasons for wishing to speak to Frank in the ancient hall. He had never been brought before the Green Man, his arrival at Hartfield being impromptu and informal by way of Master Weston’s eager introduction. Had it only been a fortnight and a day since he had first entered Highbury? How many new feelings had been awakened in her in such a short time? She had moved from being absolutely decided against marriage, and wishing to train as a Godmother, to reconsidering her position in light of this new acquaintance.

In Frank Charmall she had met a young man who answered every wish as a worthy match for herself, and he had shown her such marked attention, sought her opinion and company at every opportunity. In short, he had acted the prospective lover, and she had not been repulsed.

But was she in love? Was he? What was the strange uncertainty that prickled at the edges of her thoughts and feelings when she was with him? The feeling that something was not quite right.

Could two weeks be enough to determine a person’s character and feelings? She paced up and down the hall, a slight figure in white against the dark, hefty oak walls. The giant carving of the Green Man watched her with a judicious eye.

The studded door opened. There he was. The light behind him from the windowed hall cast him as a silhouette in the doorway. A fine silhouette he made, not too tall nor too short, but fine in figure. Not as upright as Master Knightley, to be sure, but no one had so upright a figure as Master Knightley.

Frank Charmall had a buoyancy to his movements, where Master Knightley had decisiveness. But she liked the playful, buoyant figure of Frank Charmall; he made her smile, though neither of them felt much like smiling at that moment.

‘Mistress Woodhouse,’ his voice was low and without its usual humour, ‘I was told I would find you here.’

As he stepped into the hall, where the weighty and solemn green magic lingered, he seemed to alter with every step. Emma watched with a curious and wondering eye as he moved towards her. It was as though she were seeing glimpses of him by a very different light. The charms about him could not show themselves in this place, and beneath the charms she saw a young man, still handsome, but not dazzlingly so, as he often appeared to be. He seemed younger, less sure of himself. He must have borne a confidence charm that now fell away.

There was also something sad about him. The charm of bright spirits had also fallen away. It had been masking a loneliness. And there were more surprising things to be sensed in him – there was anger and frustration beneath the surface of his youthful face. And there was love. Romantic love. But not a happy love. A thwarted love. A longing for another which caused such pain. Was it in relation to herself? Was he so deeply in love with her, and this parting so painful to him that he could barely say a word?

‘Come in,’ she said. And he moved slowly towards her, his regret showing in his face and posture. He was so dejected that he could hardly speak, and she had to prompt him into expressing his disappointment over this sad farewell and the loss of the ball.

‘Why did we wait?’ he cried. ‘We ought always to seize happiness while we can.’

He must be very much in love with her.

‘Pray, before you go, come and stand before the Green Man and receive his blessing.’ She gestured him to move before the carving.

He looked up and seemed uncertain. ‘Is it safe? He looks rather fierce. I have heard of what happens to those who displease him. My aunt has never had a good word to say of him.’

‘Only those who stand before him in deceit displease him and incur his wrath instead of his blessing,’ Emma reassured him. ‘You have nothing to fear.’

He remained looking up at the Green Man’s face. What a strange succession of emotions passed over his own face as he stood there. Fear, followed by a kind of yearning. What a singular man of mixed feelings he was.

There was a faint ripple of movement over the carving on the wall. It was as gentle as a stirring of leaves, or a quiver of butterfly wings. Emma wondered if the Green Man were going to speak unexpectedly. Frank gave a little groan as the ripple of green magic passed through the Hall, a groan that ended in a sigh as the magic passed by. ‘Oh, to be free,’ he said softly, watching the ripples on the wall. That was what Emma thought she heard him say; it had been spoken so quietly that she prompted him to repeat his words.

His gaze upon the Green Man was broken as he turned to answer her, and whatever longing had seized him now fled, and his face snapped back into an expression of dismay. He turned away, moving to the other side of the hall as far from the carving as he could get.

‘What is it that troubles you?’ Emma asked.

‘Perhaps, Mistress Woodhouse,’ he began, turning round and holding out his hands a little way towards her as though making a kind of plea. ‘I think you can hardly be quite without suspicion—’

She waited. The moment had come. He could not conceal his feelings for her now that he stood before the Green Man. The truth must come forth. He was about to share his heart. And was she ready? How did she feel?

He looked at her, but he did not speak again. More struggling emotions passed over his face. The poor man seemed quite tormented, as though he were trying to break through some barrier that kept him from speaking what he really wished to. His hands opened, then closed again. The silence was awkward. It was not how she expected a romantic declaration to be. He opened his mouth to speak, and she waited, but it was Master Weston's voice she heard next. He stood in the doorway, hailing his son in his loud voice, and declaring that they had better be off to the stables directly. Frank must make the most of the dry hour of the morning and make haste before the weather changed.

There were swift bows, there was a quick shaking of hands, and then he was gone with nothing more than a simple 'Goodbye.' The door closed upon him, and Emma felt the loss instantly, and concluded that the pang she felt could only mean that she too was in love.

THE FAIR LADY

The winged chariot alighted in a courtyard of pearl.

Rue slid from her mount, feeling exhilarated from the flight, and wishing she could fly again – fly across all of Faerie, and then across all the mortal world!

She knew exactly where she was, there could be no mistaking the spires of green stone she had passed over – it was the Green Lady's palace.

When the first few moments of bedazzlement passed, she remembered the sick dragon, and her shining eyes looked for him to see how he fared. A team of worker elves had sped to the sleigh, bundling the dragon away in a sling. Rue moved to follow, but someone blocked her way.

'Follow me,' said the fairy who had brought her from the woods. The cloud she moved in shimmered and stretched and where there had been a ball of light, now stood an elf. She was not like any elf Rue had seen in Highbury; she had a height and grandeur about her that marked her out as an elf of high-standing. She wore a gown of pale green, and a emerald pendant.

'Will it be well?' Rue asked the elf, casting a look over her shoulder at the dragon being borne away. It looked dreadfully limp. She would have thought it was dead if she'd not heard it groan as they lifted it down.

The elf did not answer. Rue hurried after her, for she moved quickly; Rue wished she didn't. She would have liked to look about her and take in the beautiful surroundings. She caught glimpses of gardens through archways, and views of fountains and trees and flowers unlike anything seen in England.

They passed through pearl doors and into a hall so high and cavernous it made Rue feel dizzy to look up. They sped through hallways and rooms with jewel-like walls, where coloured light flooded the rooms, each colour having a different meaning and mood, as though the light and colour spoke things.

The swift walk ended in a throne room. The Green Lady was waiting.

Rue knew she had never properly seen the colour green before until she met the Green Lady. She certainly had never understood the colour green before. Being bathed in green light, as it radiated from the throne and saturated the room, was strange and beautiful at the same time.

Green was life. It was growth; it was faithful and active and yet it was also restful. Rue felt all her restlessness ebb away. In that moment she saw that all her impatient energy was a kind of dissatisfaction, a searching for something that she could never find. Something elusive, something like this. A search for the life inside of things. She felt calm and content as she waited before the throne. She did not strain after anything new, did not wish for anything bigger or brighter or better. A pinch to her arm jolted her out of her tranquil state.

'Ow! What was that—?'

'Bow before our lady!' hissed the elf.

Rue mumbled a 'Sorry,' and made a clumsy bow. When she stood upright, she dared to look at the Green Lady, wondering if she were angry with her, wondering if she knew all about Rue's dreadful blunders with magic. Should she confess all? But when she saw the Green Lady's eyes, she knew she did not need to say anything. She knew all.

'Sister Rue of Highbury, apprentice of Mother Goodword, welcome.'

'Thank you, milady.' Rue wasn't surprised that the Green Lady knew her name, for she had an air of knowing everything. Had the Green Lady watched her through the eyes of the carving in the school entrance hall?

'You are one of the mortals who have entered my lands, partaking of the food and water my demesne provides, benefiting from my protection, and in return you have brought a poison-breathing creature into our midst, threatening the life of our weaker inhabitants.'

'I didn't mean to, milady. Bring a poisonous dragon into your land, that is. I found it, or rather, it found me, and I have to say it were a good thing it did, for I don't know how long I were dancing away.'

Rue ceased speaking, realising that it was rather foolish to be trying to defend herself to one so majestic. She ought to be begging pardon, not rambling. Then she recalled that one ought not to eat or drink in Faerie without offering something by way of payment.

'I'm most grateful for the berries and water, ma'am. I should be glad to repay you for them. I wouldn't have helped myself if my donkey hadn't run off with the provisions, at least he looks like a donkey but...' She stopped herself. The Green Lady knew it all; she did not need to bumble on before her.

'I accept your offer of payment, Sister Rue of Highbury.'

'You do? Erm... thank you.'

Now what had she gotten herself into? She was supposed to be asking for help, and now she was being asked to do something unknown by way of payment.

'Darkness haunts the edges of my lands and trespasses upon it.'

'Darkness? You mean the darkling folk?'

'I mean the insidious sorceress known among us as Dame Deathcap.'

'Dame Deathcap. Insidious sorceress. She sounds like a lot of fun.' Rue snorted, but then realised that no one else was smiling. 'I were joking,' she added sheepishly. 'So, why don't you vanquish her, this Dame Deathcap, you're all-powerful, ain't you?' Rue could imagine no one more powerful than this queenly fairy. Assurance and strength radiated from her.

'All powerful is not possible for any creature. Dame Deathcap is cunning. You will redeem my favour by retrieving the captives from my enemy.'

'Your enemy? You mean this Deathcap Dame?'

'She has bound my subjects to do her will. I want them back.'

'Can't... you just go and get them?' Rue was confused. If this Deathcap sorceress had taken something belonging to the powerful enchantress, guardian of the west, then what was stopping her from just demanding them back?

She had not spoken her thoughts aloud, but the Green Lady's eyes seemed to look right into her, perceiving her thoughts.

'You know not the ways of Faerie. The delicate balance of laws and territories. The interchange of one thing for a price. Everything has a value. Everything has a cost. Everything has a time.'

Rue opened her mouth to ask another question, but closed it again.

'I will not demean myself by contesting with her, I will take back what is mine to take, and I appoint you as my servant to do so.'

‘I see.’ Rue did not see. ‘So... you want me to go to this powerful sorceress and just tell her I’m taking back all the folk she’s got locked away, in the name of yourself, milady, and the sorceress will let me walk out with the prisoners. Is that what will happen?’

Rue was trying hard not to either laugh at such a foolish plan, or express her doubts. But even she could feel her sarcasm as a bad smell in the otherwise sweet greenness of the air.

‘You are a Godmother in training, are you not? With aspirations to partake of fae power and thus become a Fairy Godmother, or even a Wisewoman one day.’

‘Well, yes. But I think I’ve had one blunder too many. I don’t have much hope of graduating now.’

‘And that robs you of joy,’ said the Green Lady, not as a question, but as a fact. ‘That is a loss of your desire, your dreams, your destiny.’

‘Yes.’ Rue felt in that moment all the loss she felt in her failure. ‘And there’s worse.’ The Green Lady seemed to wait for Rue to expound, so she did. ‘I’ve lost my friend, Myrtle, who I think has followed me here. And I’ve turned Ben Larkins into a donkey, and Master Smith’s donkey into Ben, and Master Smith into a frog, and the chestnut sprite into a squirrel, or half of one, and all through losing Mother Goodword’s wand by leaving it about and letting it get stolen, and then not being able to find out who stole it. I’ve failed everyone. I even turned Elizabeth Martin’s best cow blue. Well, her udders. And her milk.’ Rue’s head hung in shame. ‘So, if I’ve to go and get in a rumpus with some Dame Deathcap, then I suppose it’s nothing that I don’t deserve, only...’

‘Only what?’

‘Only, I wish Myrtle and Ben and Master Smith and the sprite would be made safe and right again. And the cow. And Myrtle’s dragon. Not that I care for it, but she does.’

‘A wish made in the presence of the Green Lady is a powerful thing.’

Rue felt a twinge of hope at these words. She lifted her head to meet her queenly gaze.

‘But there is always a price to be paid for a wish. Are you prepared to pay it?’

‘What’s the price?’ Rue was half afraid of the answer.

‘Yourself. That is the only exchange the sorceress will take for her prisoners.’

Rue gulped. Suddenly the greenness was not only life and health, it was of something else too: it was leaves that turned away from their greenness to fall from a tree every autumn. It was grass to be plucked up to feed a hungry dairy cow or donkey. It was rose stems to be cut and apples to be eaten. It was life to be given away. All Rue’s hunger for life must be given up if she wanted to put right her mistakes, if she wanted to restore the other lives she had taken away.

‘It wouldn’t be... forever. Would it?’

‘Nothing lasts forever in this world.’

That was not quite the answer she wanted.

‘They will all be put right? All of them?’

‘A possibility of restoration will be opened.’

That was not a reassuring response either. It was as though she were being asked to make the sacrifice even without assurance that the results would be to her choosing. She sighed, and felt as though the winds that blew the leaves from the trees sighed with her. An age passed over her in that sigh. But what choice did she have?

‘Oh, Merciful Mushrooms,’ she groaned softly. ‘I’ll just have to do it.’

BAD ACQUAINTANCE

The last pair of birches in the Silver Wood stood as a gateway. Ahead loomed the Black Forest. To Myrtle's right was an unknown path, and to the left lay the fair path, gleaming softly, but she had to search carefully for it with her eyes.

Myrtle had no intention of plunging into the Black Forest, not without the protection of magic. With protection, such a idea seemed very interesting; there were creatures reported to dwell in the heart of the Black Forest that could not be met with anywhere else in Faerie. But she had important things to dwell on right now. It was obvious which path she should choose. So why did she falter?

She stood in the centre of the earthy crossroad, the Silver Woods behind, the forest towering ahead, and one path to the left and to the right. But only one path led to the Green Lady's palace. So what was this odd hesitation she felt? Why were her thoughts suddenly racing, as though each direction called out something different to her: *Go back. Forget them all. You will never succeed in anything. You may as well go back.* That was one voice. *This way. New knowledge. A new life. Come this way.* That was what the path to the right said. *Come to us. We will show you secrets. You will find a home with us.* Myrtle shivered at the low, creeping voice out of the Black Forest.

Her Godmother training came to her aid, and she rummaged around for a proverb to dwell on to still the voices, and find the right one to listen to.

A horse may run quickly, but it cannot escape its tail.

What was that about? She wasn't trying to escape. Was she? Godmother proverbs were like riddles at times.

She that lies with the pigs, rises with mud.

Pigs?

There is no place far enough from trouble, even on a winged horse.

Myrtle groaned. 'All right. I suppose I am thinking of running away. That's what this is all about. But what good will it do if I go home? I can undo nothing. I will still have failed my training. I've still lost the dragon and the wand, and let down Mother Goodword and Rue and Harriet. I cannot put anything right.'

The way to right is forward.

'I suppose forward means the path to the palace. Though I don't know what awaits me there. Faerie justice can be so extreme. What if the Green Lady is furious at the mess I've been a part of? She's the Patroness of Godmothers. What will she say to a failed Godmother?'

Only a thief need fear the queen.

She who grasps the thorn, smells the rose.

What would Mother Goodword have advised her to do? She pictured the neat parlour, hung about with embroidered cushions and tapestries. Mother Goodword always said that sewing was a metaphor: a humble thread could make a work of

beauty if placed with care.

A bad stitch can be unpicked.

How could she unpick her missteps? The consequences were already made. It was all too late.

One sure stitch will start a new tapestry.

Myrtle closed her eyes and could see Mother Goodword clear as day; she looked up from her sewing and said, '*Give thought to the path you are choosing, Sister Myrtle. Verity and virtue belong to the light. Choose wisely, child.*'

Myrtle felt rare tears prick her eyes, not least because Mother Goodword had still called her by her acolyte name.

'I chose wrong paths,' she said. 'And now I don't know who I am to be, or how to get home.'

'That's because you have no home,' said a voice.

Myrtle's eyes opened and looked to her right, where the voice had come from. 'Who are you?' Some instinctive unease caused her to take a few steps backward, so she stood within the safety of the woods.

It was a woman, tall and stately, stepping out of a light carriage, pulled by an enormous, black fae horse. Her clothes were rich and costly. Her face was mature, but still smooth-skinned, as though she had led the life of a lady at ease. Or was a lady who used magic to keep her younger-looking than her years. She looked respectable. Rather grand, in fact. But who was she, and why was she riding around away from the fair paths?

'You ask the wrong question, my dear. It is not *who are you?* But *what do you want?* That is always the most important question.'

'So... what do you want?' said Myrtle, feeling a persuasive injunction to say what the woman prompted. This persuasion raised Myrtle's suspicion a degree further. She took another step back to ensure she was within the fair paths of the woods. She had spent enough time amongst the fair trees, drinking fair water and eating fair fruit to recognise darkling power, even if it was skilfully masked in the form of a respectable lady.

'I want the same as you, my dear. Power to choose my own path, and to do what pleases me, not what pleases everyone else.'

'That's not what I want,' said Myrtle. 'I want to do what's right.'

The woman threw back her head, with its fashionable hat of silk flowers and trailing golden feathers, and she laughed. A laugh a little too wild to be respectable.

'What's so funny?' Myrtle's brow contracted into a frown.

'Because I know you. I know what you really desire, my dear, and it is not so insipid as that. You have a destiny. A strong one. Your bloodline is powerful.'

'What do you know of my bloodline? Who are you?'

Myrtle was both offended and intrigued. She knew so little of her family history. Uncle Richard was her only surviving relative, and Uncle Richard refused to speak about her mother.

'I can tell you everything,' said the lady, holding out a gloved hand. 'Come with me, and you will know all.'

Myrtle was sorely tempted by the force of persuasion, but not tempted enough to obey. There was something wrong. The fairies in the Silver Woods knew it, as did the trees. The leaves rustled together in a hiss. The sprites in the last pair of birches had fled their trees to watch from a distance. A sylph whirled about Myrtle's head, whispering in her ear: *don't go, don't go, don't go.*

'I won't go,' said Myrtle firmly. 'Please leave me.' She made a little bow, as if she really were speaking with a well-to-do lady, and turned away. But the lady

called after her.

‘We both want things that are rightfully ours. I want justice. You want your little creature and your friend.’

Myrtle paused. Was she referring to Rue and the dragon?

‘What do you know of them?’ She realised as soon as she had said the words that it had been a foolish question. If the lady was of darkling power, then nothing she would say would be quite the truth.

‘I saw the country bumpkin with that margool whelp.’

Myrtle’s head turned a little more; her shoulder followed until she was half turned towards the lady.

‘Country bumpkin?’

‘Heavy-footed as a bear. Hands like coal shovels.’

That sounded like Rue, but in an unkind way.

‘What did the *margool* whelp look like?’ If the lady had truly seen him, she would describe him as—

‘Sick. Poisoned.’

Myrtle whirled round. ‘When? Where?’

The lady lifted a hand to point to the sky.

Myrtle followed the direction of her finger ‘In the trees?’

‘Flying.’

‘But Rue can’t fly!’ The lady was mocking her.

‘They were carried away.’

‘By whom? Where?’

The lady shrugged. ‘I did not say I knew everything. But then, I did not say I did not know either. Come with me, and we’ll find them.’

‘I don’t believe a word of anything you say.’ But it was hard to just ignore her. Clearly, she had seen Rue and the dragon. It was a relief to hear that they’d found each other, and were both alive. For now. But where were they? ‘Merciful Mushrooms!’ Myrtle groaned.

The lady gave what could only be described as a growl. ‘No need for foul talk,’ she said. ‘Come with me and I’ll show you how to find your friends.’ She patted the seat beside her in the open carriage. ‘Come! You will never find them alone.’

The lady’s voice of command had power in it; and once again Myrtle felt the tug of the persuasion. Were she not within the woods, she might well have been overcome; she may well have joined her. The sylph whirled about her head again, urging her not to go.

‘Even if all you have spoken is half true,’ announced Myrtle, summoning up a good deal of effort to speak, for the force of persuasion was something to be reckoned with. ‘It is not wholly true, for I can tell you are using darkling speech.’

‘Everything has some truth,’ said the lady. Her face made an unladylike sneer. For a moment Myrtle thought she saw a wart on the lady’s smooth chin. She blinked, and the wart vanished.

‘Don’t be so nice,’ said the lady. ‘Getting what you want, what you need, that’s all that matters. Everyone makes up their own *truth*, dearie.’

The last word sounded raspy and low, as though another voice lay just below the well-modulated tone of the fine lady. Myrtle forced herself to turn away, meaning to find another path out of the woods; one that did not involve taking counsel from a twisty, dark-tongued person.

‘So, you do not wish to know where your friends are?’

Myrtle strode away, but the lady’s voice floated to her between the trees. She was saying something about a donkey, but Myrtle covered her ears and ran farther

into the woods.

She walked a good while, but could find no path leading westwards. Perhaps there really was only one way out. It felt as though hours had passed, so she retraced her steps, peering out from behind the last of the silver birches to see if the lady were gone. There was no sign of her, so she stepped out of the gateway between the tree trunks, shielding her eyes from the low light of the afternoon to see more clearly.

The path to the right was empty. Good. Now she must get onto the fair path to her left, and quickly, that she might be safe. There were only a dozen steps of space between the Silver Woods and the fair path, but that was a dozen steps where she was exposed and vulnerable. She took a deep breath and decided it would be wise to run.

There was a noise, like a large bird whistling through the air from above, and Myrtle threw her head back to see a witch on a broomstick swooping down toward her as fast as a diving bird of prey. A feeling of heavy confusion descended on Myrtle, and suddenly she did not know which way she was supposed to go. She had but a moment to move – why was it so hard? Why couldn't she take a step in the right direction and get onto the safe path? What was happening to her? Some power was scrambling her mind and dulling her limbs, making everything feel so heavy.

'Help me, Green Lady!' Myrtle gasped, and immediately she saw the gleam of the fair path and her legs moved in accordance to her will. She ran, gaining the path just as the witch plunged down, missing her by inches. She had passed so close that the very knots in the wood of her broom were seen.

The witch shrieked with rage and veered away, but Myrtle had reached the safety of the Green Lady's path, and she stumbled along, hitching up her skirt to run as fast as she could.



Rue had to leave the Green Lady's palace; she would have given anything to look around and explore the grounds. But it was not to be. She was hustled back to the winged horse creature by the bossy elf and flown back to the spot she'd been taken up. She asked after the dragon, to be told it was none of her business. He did not belong to her.

'It'll be all right, though, won't it?' Rue asked, thinking of how fond Myrtle was of the ugly blue-scaly thing.

'Follow the path,' the elf ordered. Ignoring all questions. 'Do not eat or drink anything outside of the Green Lady's borders. Do not go near the dancing ring, and do not accept any invitations, no matter who gives them.'

'What, no dancing, no parties?' This elf was such a crosspatch.

'When you reach the Rushy Brook, only cross it in daylight. You will find the house you seek on the eastward path at the crossroad marked by thorn trees.'

'Hey,' said Rue. 'I know that house. I saw it on a map. It's the witch's cottage. Do you mean to say the Wild Wood witch is this Dame Deathcap sorceress?'

'She has many names.'

'She ain't going to be much fun to work for.' Rue was wishing already she had not agreed to this stupid business.

'You are under promise. Break it, and the conditions will not stand.'

That sobered Rue from any further retort. Oh, why didn't she add to her wish something about being sure to get home again? How long would it take to work off

her misdemeanours? A day in Faerie could be a month in England. She might finally get free of the old witch only to find that there was no one left to go home to. But she'd made a promise.

'I don't break promises,' she said stoutly. 'I'll be on my way.'

The elf did not even deign to reply. She vanished into the form of a tiny cloud of light, the fay horse-goats disappearing with her.

'Ah well,' said Rue, summoning up some glimmer of optimism. 'Here we go.' But her feet would not move. 'I said here we go,' she announced louder, that her feet might get the message, but they remained rooted to the spot. 'I hate being tied to one place,' she moaned. 'I can't think of nothing worse than being enslaved and stuck forever with some witch telling me what to do!'

Her sacrifice of her freedom had seemed the right thing to do when she stood bathed in green light in the palace. Now it seemed like a terrible idea. A nightmare.

'But I can't go home and leave everyone in such a pickle.' She bent her head to address her stubborn feet. 'Can I?' Slowly one foot lifted off the ground and moved forwards. Then the other. And Rue set off to her fate.

A VILLAIN

Dame Deathcap was in a ferocious mood. Things had been going so well. The theft of magic had worked in her favour, reopening the darkling path down to the old bridge that had been sealed off for the past century.

Every working of illicit magic had made the paths a little stronger, and the bridge more tangible, until it had been sure enough to cross. She could come and go as she pleased now, without a long journey to the north or south gateways, though she took care. She did not choose to run into that Knight of the Well. He was the only one who could rouse up trouble for her, though she doubted he knew what strength he possessed in that cursed old sword of his.

She had bided her time long enough. Even the protection of the Green Man couldn't keep her out now that the bridge was so far opened. He wanted to keep the power of green all to himself, but she would have it too. She knew the value of green. And she knew her rights. She had the right to get back what was hers, to get back what was stolen from her and eaten by the Wild Man's daughter. That inept, impotent Wild Man who had been successfully worn down to uselessness by letting her curses of worry and fear do their slow and sure work on him. A blighted Guardian. He couldn't defend the village from a gnat. She would have that pretty daughter of his. She would get back what was her own. She would get control of that Door and then she could wield her arts against that loathsome Green Man to the east and that wretched Green Lady of the west. She would advance on their borders, inch by foot by yard by mile by league. She would stretch out her domain as far as she wanted and turn it all into a glorious garden.

She would grow enough enchanted produce to feed half the mortal kingdom. They would beg for her wares. One bite of her food was enough to hook them forever. She would drain them of their gold until she ruled as queen in a rival court to that of the Faerie queen herself.

Dame Deathcap's ferocious mood abated while she envisioned all this acquisition of expansion and power. And if she could get rid of that knight and his sword, what was to stop her from taking all of Highbury? Every one of those miserable inhabitants, mortal and fae, could be put to work. A sorceress could never have enough slaves, not when she had ambitions.

Then she remembered the blue-eyed girl she had just lost and growled again. She'd wanted that girl. She could sense the potential in her. She could go far in the ways of magic, if trained right. She had that curiosity that was needed to lure her into dark ways. It wouldn't have taken long to break her. She would have made a useful apprentice, her young blood and bones being excellent for powerful compost, should she outgrow her usefulness. And she liked to have nice looking youngsters about her. There was something cheering in knowing that all that youth and strength and beauty was to be all used up on carrying out her wishes.

It was too bad about the girl. It spoiled her day. She would have had that shovel-handed girl too, if she could have. Those hands of hers would have been good for digging in the garden. She could have worked her like a horse for a long time before she broke. She might have been useful for housework too. The elf she had doing the cooking was an irritant. Of all the fair folk, elves were the most insipid of them all. She undercooked everything and fainted every time she had to disembowel and pluck so much as a chicken. She was going into the compost with the rest of the worthless slaves and strays.

And that donkey in a man's body, he was not a lot of use. But he was nice to look at. She'd think about what to do with him now that she had him. She needed something to cheer her up. It was hard work having to live like this, she'd rather be at her other dwelling place, but she needed to stay close to the bridge for now, and cultivate her black garden.

As she flew over the Mischief Marshes, she aimed her broomstick at a flock of will-o-wisps for the sport of it, and cackled as they scattered with their puny shrieks.

But what was this? She looked down, guiding her broomstick between the treetops of the Wild Wood. There was someone on the darkling path to her house from the crossroads. And it looked mortal. She flew lower and squinted to see better. It looked like the shovel-handed girl. What was she doing back? And she was taking the path to her own house, as though she meant to make her way there.

Well, well. Perhaps this day might not be such a bad one. The witch struck her broomstick with her heel to climb higher, and pointed it homewards as the black crow flies. She'd be ready to meet her guest.



Rue among the trees bordering the clearing where the witch's house stood. She thought as she neared it, she could glimpse the house as a dreadful gloomy hovel, with skulls of every size and species stuck on the fence posts of bone. She thought she had seen a single window under the blackened thatch roof staring at her like an empty eye socket, and the shape of the door like a gaping mouth. Her heart sank deeper with every step. She was not sure she could do this.

But when she finally reached the edge of the trees and could see the house clearly, it was not as she had thought. It sat snug and pretty, with white fencing and little curtains at the window. The thatch roof was golden and trim, the front door framed by climbing roses. Rue knew this was a glamour, but it helped just a little. She looked down at her feet and told them they must make the last few steps, but they stubbornly refused to move. 'We ain't got no choice,' she told them. 'I don't want to go in there no more than you do. But we got Ben and Master Smith and everyone else in a fix, and now we got to get them out of it. So, *move!*'

Her right foot twitched and took a tiny reluctant step. Rue gave orders to her left foot, and thus she shuffled her way to the white fence with buttercups growing at its base.

'Welcome, dearie,' said a syrupy voice, and the gate flew open. The witch was in a little old lady glamour, nodding and smiling from under her large straw hat, set about the crown with poppies. 'Come in, come in.' And the gate shut with a click like grating bones.



A since the loss of Frank Charmall from Highbury. Emma forced herself to dwell on this fact with sadness at least once a day. It surprised that she did not remember to feel sad more often.

She had thought that this falling in love business was wrought with unhappy emotion when two lovers were parted, or love went unrequited. But Emma found she remained as cheerful as usual once the first pangs of disappointment had passed. In fact, she was not so sure if the wellspring of her disappointment did not lie in the loss of the ball more than the loss of the young man she would have opened it with.

She did not lose her appetite, did not grow pale and thin, felt no compunction to read melancholy poetry or play ballads about pining lovers. By the end of the second week, Emma was doubting if she really were in love. Or perhaps there was something deficient in her that she should feel so little? That was not very likely. Perhaps her own falling in love would be of a more civilised fashion.

Emma braced herself for Harriet's visit that morning, hearing her light footstep approaching the parlour. She was expecting it to be a difficult one, for Master Elftyn had returned to Highbury, bringing his new bride with him, and it was all anyone could talk of in the village. Neither Harriet nor Emma had seen her, but Harriet had overheard Mistress Cole talking in Ford's.

Mistress Cole had happened to be at her drawing room window as the newly arrived couple walked by, and could report that the new Mistress Elftyn wore a very fine cloak, and her muff was prodigious, and looked like sable. She could give no particulars as to Mistress Elftyn's features, seeing as she was well covered by the hood of her cloak, it being a damp day, but she could report that Mistress Elftyn had a goodly number of bows and rows of frogging on her cloak. Frogging was really quite the thing in town. Mistress Elftyn must be a very elegant lady to have frogging.

I and the rain had abated for a time, thus it was likely that anyone in Highbury with curiosity would make their way to the market, hoping to see the new arrival to their village.

Emma deemed it better that Harriet's first view of the happy couple should be in public, for that would help Harriet in showing some restraint over the pain of unrequited love.

'Mistress Woodhouse, you must believe me when I say that I am not a bit upset about *him*,' Harriet assured her. But Emma knew better than to take Harriet's protestations at face value.

'If you feel overwhelmed, Harriet,' she counselled, 'you must say so, and we shall come home directly.'

'We shall not go home before we have crossed off today's visits,' insisted Harriet. 'We are up to 'N' now: Mistress Newberry, the Nackington family, the Nokes, the Newgates, and old Master Nonnington.'

'To be sure,' agreed Emma, with an air of resignation, 'we will not neglect our investigations, though there is not one tolerable person on the list.'

Despite the cold weather there was a good turnout of residents. No doubt all with the same intent as Emma and Harriet – that of glimpsing the new Mistress Elftyn.

They walked round the market, receiving all the greetings of their neighbours. But they did not have to go far before they saw the object of their interest.

Mistress Elftyn was all in cherry red and looked dazzlingly bright on such a cloudy March morning.

‘Oh, isn’t she lovely,’ said Harriet. ‘No wonder he fell in love with her. Do you think red is his favourite colour now? Red like a rose.’

‘I would call it poppy red,’ said Emma. ‘Such as grows commonly in the fields. And we cannot tell if she is lovely, for we are only seeing the back of her through this crowd.’

‘Oh, but one can tell straight away, even by her shoulder, that she is very elegant.’

‘Well, we need not approach any closer,’ said Emma, ‘we have had a first—’

‘Oh, she’s turning round!’ cried Harriet. ‘Oh, I knew it, I knew she would be beautiful!’

‘Upon my word!’ said Emma. ‘How could she bear to wear that shade of green as a lining? It quite hurts the eye. Does she not know that one does not wear green in Highbury in these troubled times?’

‘Oh, they are coming this way, Mistress Woodhouse. Look how she holds his arm.’

‘And violet gloves! Is this what fashion has come to in town? Is it all glare and gaudiness?’

‘Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, they are coming this way!’

‘Then we shall just step into this shop out of sight for a – ah, Mistress Baytes, how do you do?’

‘Oh, very well, Mistress Woodhouse, how very kind of you to ask! I just popped out for a twist of tea, for we are down to our last spoonful. There is dear Sister Harriet, are you well? Jane is very well. Do come up for tea, Jane would be so pleased to see you. Have you seen our newest member of Highbury? We are to call tomorrow. Do come back for tea. It is a fennel blend. Do you care for fennel? Jane likes it with her supper, she says a cup of fennel with a drop of honey is just the thing. A spoon of honey is excellent for Mother’s rheumy eyes and all her other little ailments, not that she complains, you know. But her eyes have been remarkably good of late. You would never know to look at her that she has long suffered with rheumy eyes, she looks so well, none of her usual complaints all winter and now we are into spring, it is quite astonishing, and her appetite so improved, why, she makes a better supper than Jane does. Oh, won’t you come up for tea?’

Emma did not recall saying she would come up for tea, but somehow she found herself squeezing into Mistress Baytes’ small sitting room.

‘Three months,’ Mistress Baytes was saying. ‘Exactly three months tomorrow since dear Jane came to us.’ Mistress Baytes beamed at her niece, and Jane gave a sweet smile in reply, but Emma, having the advantage of sitting close by Jane’s chair noted the tightness about Jane’s eyes, as one often had when suffering a headache. Jane Fairfayce was also looking paler than usual. She wondered if Harriet noticed anything, but Harriet was often in low spirits herself, as she fretted over the loss of her Godmothering Sisters and the lack of progress she and Emma were making with their investigations.

Mistress Baytes chattered on about the terrible trouble her neighbours were having, and how ashamed she felt in knowing how very comfortable they were, herself and Mother and dear Jane, without any of the difficulties that everyone else seemed to find. When their little stores of eggs or pork or flour or apples ran low, why, it was remarkable, but some kind friend was sure to send a fresh supply.

While Mistress Baytes rattled on, Emma distracted herself by making a surreptitious practise of sensing on Jane, who sat winding wool for her grandmother. She concentrated on the sense of feeling and was very surprised by what she felt when she applied herself.

On the outside Jane Fairfayce was unruffled, serene, the epitome of elegance and composure. Yet what was this? This choppy, churning, lurching sensation? Why, it was dreadful. No wonder Jane was looking pale. What could be the meaning of such turmoil?

Emma recalled her own idea of Jane bearing a secret – a forbidden love for her friend's new husband. The notion had gained strength by the knowledge that Jane was to remain among them in Highbury for some time longer, having refused to join her friend abroad in the kingdom of Eire. She had inexplicably chosen to remain in this poky set of rooms, shut up with an aunt who would not stop talking for half a minute. What motive could so lovely and accomplished a young lady as Jane Fairfayce have for such a penury, if it were not the torment of forbidden love?

Small wonder that Jane was often sighted out walking for long miles in the lanes and along the river bank. Emma was both sorry for Jane and rather taken with the romance of it all. It was a pity Mother Goodword were not at hand, for surely something could be done for her in the way of matchmaking her. But perhaps she would not wish to be matched. Perhaps she felt her heart belonged to another, and she could not disentangle it no matter how much misery it caused.

Emma sighed out loud at such bittersweet thoughts, and Mistress Baytes broke off from whatever she was saying to exclaim, 'Oh, Mistress Woodhouse, how very remiss of me, here you have been sitting this quarter of an hour and I have not even called for tea. I am shocked at myself. Jane, dear, you should have told me that Mistress Woodhouse had not yet had any tea.'

'Patty is making the tea,' Jane said. 'I'll see if it is ready.'

'It must be ready,' said Mistress Baytes, 'but do not trouble yourself to go down, Jane, it is so draughty on the stairs, and draughtier than ever today. I will call down.'

The door to the stairwell was opened and the call duly made.

'You must take something from the buffet table, Mistress Woodhouse. We are out of cake, for Mistress Cox brought her two girls with her this morning, such sweet girls, but they quite ate it up all the cake. But we have some baked apples, they really are delicious, and Jane likes to take one about this time of the day. Do please, Mistress Woodhouse, take a baked apple. Sister Harriet, you must take a baked apple.'

The apples were brought on little plates and handed round. Jane's apple was very golden and unusually large.

'No!' said Dame Baytes suddenly and loudly. Everyone gave a little start. 'Not that one!' Dame Baytes, pointed at the apple. 'Give it to one of the young ladies, Hetty. But not to Jane.'

'Why... ma'am...' Mistress Baytes was almost speechless at this unexpected outburst.

'I think, dear Aunt,' Jane said, 'that Grandmama knows I could not manage so large an apple. It is a littler earlier in the day than my usual hour for eating.'

Mistress Baytes complied, and gave the large apple to Harriet, as Emma had been served first, and already held her plate.

'Thank you,' said Harriet. 'Might I trouble you for a fork?'

'Forks!' cried Mistress Baytes, whipping the plates away again to the buffet table and laying forks and napkins on them. When she redistributed the apples, it

was Emma who now held the large golden apple. Emma almost commented on it rightfully belonging to Harriet, not sure that she could manage so large a portion, but Harriet had already taken up a piece of her own and eaten it.

‘So very golden,’ Mistress Baytes murmured, as she sat back down opposite Emma. ‘Why, one would think it was the Last Apple, so remarkably large and golden. Like a big gold ball. What was it William Larkins was telling you of this year’s Last Apple, Mother? I am sure he was talking to you of it.’

But Dame Baytes did not reply. Emma suspected that Dame Baytes’ deafness was very selective.

‘I wonder who did take the Last Apple at the end of the harvest,’ Mistress Baytes continued. ‘Do you know?’ she enquired, looking between Emma and Harriet.

‘I heard that it was poor Master Larkins’ son, the one who disappeared at Midwinter,’ Harriet said between mouthfuls.

‘Dear me, how sad,’ said Mistress Baytes. ‘Poor William Larkins, he is such an old friend. Now where did I put the tea strainer?’

Emma was astonished at how delicious the apple was. It tasted of honey and apple blossom and sunshine. She forgot the day outside was cold and grey. Every bite of apple made her think of late summer and golden autumn.

They ate in silence, and while Emma ate, she recalled the letter Mistress Weston had received that very morning – a letter from Frank Charmall, announcing his return to Highbury. He ought to arrive on the morrow, but if his second arrival was as his first, he might surprise them again by arriving today. That was a cheerful thought to drive away the sleety clouds outside. She observed to herself that here she was again thinking of Frank Charmall. Was it a symptom of love that he should so often occupy her thoughts?

What would Master Knightley think of his return, she wondered? Master Knightley had no great opinion of Frank, that was clear. He seemed rather distracted of late, more serious, as though something were pressing upon him. Undoubtedly, he was upset about his steward’s son disappearing. She knew he had searched far and wide for any clue as to his whereabouts. He was very fond of his steward; he was Master Knightley’s idea of an excellent man – practical, hardworking and plain speaking. Small wonder that he did not care for Frank Charmall with his attention to fashion, his life of leisure and his effusive charm.

With the last bite of apple melting on her tongue, in one sudden, startling moment, like a ray of sunshine breaking through a cloud, Emma saw Frank Charmall as though through the eyes of Master Knightley.

In that moment of clarity she realised with an absolute brilliance of vision that she did *not* love Frank Charmall. She never had. She liked him. She was looking forward to his cheerful company, his gallant manners, his jovial humour, but her heart was not his. Poor young man. She must be on her guard when he came, and take care not to give him any encouragement. They would be good friends and no more. They would not be such friends as she and Master Knightley were, to be sure. But there was no one else quite like Master Knightley. She swallowed the last mouthful with this thought and put her fork down neatly.

‘How was your apple, Mistress Woodhouse?’ said Mistress Baytes, breaking through Emma’s thoughts. ‘I have heard your father recommending a baked apple as being excellent for the digestion, quite the thing.’

‘Quite delicious,’ was the honest reply. ‘I do not think I have ever tasted better.’

MOMENTS OF REGRET

Rue stood before the door of the witch's cottage. Did the sweet little squirrel's face on the door knocker just turn into a leering imp? She blinked, and the imp wavered back into a squirrel, but the eyes were not quite right.

'In you go, dearie,' cried the old lady, giving Rue a shove from behind. Rue was a strong young woman, but she almost went flying through the doorway – what strength the little old lady had! Except she was not a little old lady at all. Rue caught herself just in time and braced herself against the doorframe.

'Just a minute, if you please,' said Rue. 'You don't know what I'm here for, and I know better than to go marching into a witch's house without laying out some conditions.'

'Conditions?' The old woman tilted her straw-hatted head, and Rue glimpsed the cunning look in the old woman's eyes. She had better tread carefully.

'Yes, Dame Deathcap. Conditions.'

'Who told you that name?' A large wart shimmered on the end of the witch's nose and her chin lost its soft dimpled roundness and quivered into sharpness.

'My conditions,' Rue continued, trying not to stare at the hairs sprouting out of the wart, then disappearing again into rosy skin, 'is that I agree to work for you for a time, in return for the release of your slaves. A trade.'

'Slaves? I have no slaves, dearie.'

'Well, workers, servants, whatever you call 'em.'

'And who would these servants be? Do you see any servants?'

'Well, no.' Rue glanced through the doorway she was resisting being pushed through. The room beyond looked pleasant enough: a rocking chair of willow on the hearth, a cheerful fire. 'I s'pose they're all out the back or in the kitchen, or something.'

'Who told you I had servants?'

'The Green Lady.'

'Ahhh!' The witch hissed and drew back at that name, her glamour slipping completely, leaving her standing warts and all.

'An' she wants 'em all back. So I'll do their work for a time in return for you letting 'em all go.' Rue was feeling anxious now that the witch looked like a witch. She preferred the glamour. The cottage was taking on a different aspect as well. The white-washed fence was now a macabre structure of bones and skulls. The doorway before her gaped like a mouth of rotten teeth. The cheerful fire was a pile of ash, and the rocking chair had sprouted fierce carvings, like gargoyles.

Suddenly this was all a terrible idea, and she took a step back. But a bony, strong hand shot out and gripped her wrist.

'You can do their work, then, dearie.'

'And you'll let 'em go? All of 'em?'

‘All of them.’

‘And how long must I work for to pay ‘em off? I can’t stay forever.’

A twisting of the mouth into what might have been a grin, or might be a sneer.

‘Two moons.’

‘Two moons?’

That was two months. That was not so bad. It was a long time, fifty-six whole days and nights, but if it undid all her magic-blunders, then it would be worth it. ‘Right then. But one more condition.’

The grin was definitely a sneer. ‘You have a lot of conditions, dearie. First all my servants to be sent off, then you will only stay for a very little while, and all because that interfering windbag in her pea-green tower decides she wants to poke her nose in my affairs.’ The witch’s face took on a darker hue. ‘Now what? What’s the last condition?’

‘I can’t bear to be cooped up. I must be able to walk. I have to be allowed to step outside the gate every day.’ Rue glanced at the garden gate. The skull above the crossbones in the middle of it seemed to be laughing at her.

‘So be it. Now in you go.’

‘Wait!’ Rue braced herself again against the doorframe.

‘What now!’

‘We haven’t agreed what my duties are to be for the next two moons.’

‘Your duties are to do the work of one of my servants, dearie.’

‘And what would that be, exactly? I just want to make sure there ain’t nothing, you know, *grisly* to do. I won’t kill nothing or chop up body parts or nothing like that.’

‘So be it.’ The witch sounded amused, judging by her low cackle of laughter. ‘No *grisly* work. Now *in*!’

And Rue was shoved through the doorway and into the darkness.



E Rue and the dragon spurred Myrtle on, despite her legs feeling a little shaky after her near miss with the witch.

She had no way of telling how far she had to travel. On the map in the school library, the Silver Woods had looked no more than ten miles in length, yet she had walked for three days through them. The map had shown the path to the Green Palace to be at least two hundred miles from the border into Highbury, but she knew there were seven-league paths that covered three miles in one step. She needed to find one of those, but she also knew that she would only find it if the Green Lady wished her to.

Either she was in luck, or the Green Lady was looking out for her, for she soon spied a pathway with a pale green glow to it, running crosswise from the ordinary pathway. She stepped into the green path then gasped as a wave of nausea rippled through her and she was propelled three miles in a step.

She stood bent over, her hands on her knees, waiting for the dizziness and sickness to pass. It felt like the time she had gotten caught in a storm on a pleasure boat when she was a child – the lurching of her stomach, the whirling of her head. This would not be a pleasant journey if she had to put up with this every step of the way. Only desperation could motivate her to press on, and take another step.

She had to rest between each pace, but her body gradually adjusted to the movement of travelling at a magical acceleration, and the lurching of her stomach

lessened as she progressed.

Every step brought her into a new landscape. One step brought her into a cornfield where a flock of corn fairies scolded her and tugged her hair, asking her how she would like them to trample on her house? Myrtle apologised, caught her breath, and stepped on to find herself thigh deep in an icy stream with a pair of brownies staring at her, as they sat fishing on the bank.

The next step carried her into a farmyard, where she lurched into a flock of fae chickens who squawked and flapped and pecked in indignation at such a rude arrival. Myrtle wondered if this timesaving way of travel was worth the trouble, but the thought of finding Rue and the dragon and seeking help from the Green Lady was motivation to endure.

It was such a relief when the Green Palace came into view. The seven-league path ended a mile or so from the palace gates, but she could see the spires above the treetops, and she stumbled towards them. Walking on a regular path after the seven-league one made her legs feel strange, as though the ground was rolling up and down. She meandered for half a mile, while her body and senses readjusted.

T Was she expected? She could see no one about in the entrance court.

The paving was iridescent, like green mother-of-pearl. Formal gardens surrounded the palace, and she caught glimpses of fantastical fountains and statuary through archways. It was hard to desist from going through them to look around, but she had no time for strolling through gardens. She had a Sister and a dragon to find.

The court, while empty of living folk, was well populated with statues. She passed sculptures of fascinating creatures she had never seen before: something like a griffin with the wings of a swan and the head of an ox; a bear standing on two legs with the head of a unicorn; smaller statues of creatures like rabbits and foxes, yet not quite rabbits and foxes, some with wings, some with horns, all bearing shields with the symbol of the Green Lady upon them: a single leaf.

The bear statue with the unicorn head guarding the entrance door stepped forward as she reached it. 'Merciful Mushrooms!' exclaimed Myrtle, as the statue came to life.

'Who seeks to enter the court of the Green Lady?' boomed the guard in a voice that seemed to belong more to its bear's body than its unicorn head.

'I wish to enquire about a mortal visitor. And a dragon whelp.'

'Who seeks to enter the court of the Green Lady?' demanded the guard a second time.

'Why... I do.'

Myrtle did not know what else to add. Who was she? She had been about to say *Sister Myrtle, Godmother-in-Training*, but she was no longer sure if she had any right to that title. She could call herself: *Mary Prince, formerly Sister Myrtle, disgraced Godmother-in-Training, who has lost all hope of graduating, due to the purchase of a stolen dragon which subsequently ate the wand belonging to her mentor and headmistress, in addition to all manner of troubles.*

But that seemed rather a mouthful, and a depressing one at that.

To her surprise, the guard stepped back, directing the spear in its hand towards the doorway behind it.

She passed through the arched entrance and into an inner courtyard shaped by twelve walls of pale green stone, with a door in each wall, and a sundial in the

centre of the paved court. She paused to look at the beautiful sundial, made of some metal unknown to her. As she drew closer, she saw that it was not a sundial at all, but some kind of seasonal marker, with the months of the year depicted around the rim. The dial was resting on the third month. In England that would be March, though, it could not be March in England, for it had been Midwinter when she left, and that was only a matter of days ago. Wasn't it?

One of the twelve doors opened. An elf stood as though waiting for her; a stately, tall elf, not a homely elf like the ones who had settled in Highbury, but a royal-looking elf. She gave no smile or word of greeting, but only a disdainful stare at Myrtle's sopping wet boots and skirt.

'I stepped into a stream,' Myrtle said, trying to match the elf's dignified posture, but feeling at a disadvantage in her current state. 'And a hen coop.' Feathers were plastered to her damp skirt. Judging by the elf's stare at Myrtle's head, there were feathers in her hair too.

The elf turned and gestured for Myrtle to follow.

The interior of the palace were no less beautiful than the outside. Colour and light decorated every surface. Myrtle felt she had never understood before that colour and light were a language in themselves, rich in meaning. She had a growing desire to spend the rest of her days in this palace, studying such languages, learning their secrets and garnering their wisdom.

When she reached the throne room of the Green Lady, and the fullness of green soaked into her, she knew she had never seen green before. She had seen it every day in grass and leaves and plants, but she had never *seen* green.

'Welcome, Sister Myrtle of Highbury.' The Green Lady spoke from her throne.

Myrtle bowed, feeling no surprise that the Green Lady knew her name. But then it dawned on her that she had called her by her acolyte name. Did that mean...?

'What do you seek?'

'I seek your help as patron of Godmothers, my lady. And I also seek a fellow Sister who went ahead of me to find you. And a dragon. A young one, very ill.'

'Who brings a dragon into my domain, a thing forbidden?'

Myrtle had the sensation that the Green Lady already knew the answer to this.

She could make excuses, protest that it was that roamer's fault for stealing the young dragon, and she was only trying to help him. But the green light soaking into her drained her of all desire to protest or argue.

Verity and virtue. They belong to the light.

She had made her choices, for good or for ill. She would bear the consequences.

'I did, my lady. Forgive me.' She felt moved to sink to her knees in a posture of humility.

'And what was it you did, Sister Myrtle? What are your transgressions against the laws of Faerie and the laws of Godmothering?'

Myrtle winced.

She who grasps the thorn, smells the rose.

'I... purchased the dragon from a roamer who held it captive. I wished to return it to its home.'

'And how did you intend to find its home?'

'I was not thinking of that when I bought it. I suppose I thought I would find out through research where it came from.'

'You trust a good deal to books.'

Myrtle was not sure if this was a question or a statement.

‘I find them very helpful. And interesting. One can find out most things from them, if one has access to a good library.’

‘You will not find everything you need within books, Sister Myrtle. You will likely never find the whereabouts of your margool’s home, for example.’

‘Why is that, my lady? And what *is* a margool?’

‘A margool has no home. Not anymore. As to what he is, you will discover all in due course. Perhaps you will find it out from a book.’

Was the Green Lady was mocking her? Mockery seemed an unlikely thing in this place.

‘There is something you need that you could not find the answer to in your library, Sister Myrtle. What is it that you seek of me?’

‘The margool ate an object of magic that we, my Sisters and I, were responsible for. My Sister came into Faerie to seek help. But I cannot find her.’

There was a long, rich silence. Myrtle remained on her knees with her head bowed. She felt the full force of her errors. Without the Green Lady saying a word, Myrtle knew that she was being weighed. On one side lay the irresponsibility of not guarding the safety of the wand entrusted to them. Added to this was her rash action in determining to take the margool, and making a transaction with a roamer, which was strictly forbidden. And as a result of bringing the margool to the school, and failing to secure him, the wand had been irrevocably lost just when they had recovered it. And then there was Elizabeth Martin’s garbled account of Benjamin Larkins and someone’s donkey being magically swapped, not to mention the opening of the darkling bridge into Highbury which had already begun. These all weighed heavily against her, for she had had a part in them all. What would the punishment be?

All these thoughts rolled over Myrtle, but just as she felt she could not bear her mistakes any further, they lifted. A lightness reached her senses. She lifted her head a little, and the Green Lady was no longer sat on a throne with a crown of authority on her head – she sat upon a chair. A very ordinary chair, and with a veil of whisper-fine gossamer on her head in place of a crown.

And suddenly Myrtle was not on her knees, but seated on a chair very close to the Green Lady. Just as if they were in Mother Goodword’s parlour, about to have tea and a comfortable talk. Myrtle half thought she saw the Green Lady take up an embroidery hoop, just as Mother Goodword would have done during a time of conversation. The air held the sweet, clean fragrance of kindness. What a wonderful, green scent it was. She had made mistakes, had set in motion dreadful consequences for other people, but there had been no malice in her actions. It was forbidden to trade with a roamer, but the plight of the creature had compelled her. She had been moved by pity.

‘A bad stitch can be unpicked,’ said the Green Lady. ‘Do you believe this?’

For a fraction of a moment Myrtle thought it was Mother Goodword who had spoken. She blinked as a gleam of green light dazzled her vision.

‘Yes, my lady.’

Relief washed over her. She realised that green was renewal. Green was fresh hope. Green was a new beginning, a new page, a new chance.

‘One sure stitch will start a new tapestry,’ said the Green Lady.

There was another silence, as though Myrtle were expected to reply. Hope bubbled up. Could she really start again? But what of the margool? What of her friends? What of her Godmothering? A new tapestry meant the old one was gone. A new tapestry was not a recovered tapestry.

‘The new comes out of the old. As one seed falls, another shoot rises.’

‘I wish with all my heart to begin again, my lady.’

Myrtle had never felt so full of desire for life and all its promise. ‘I see now that the right way is always forward.’

‘A wish in the presence of the Green Lady is a powerful thing.’

Myrtle met the Green Lady’s gaze. It was both comfortable as soft spring sunlight in a dappled glade, and as queenly as a great arching ocean wave.

‘But there is always a price for a wish. Are you prepared to pay it?’

‘What is the price?’ Myrtle was almost afraid of the answer. Yet there was a rightness to it all.

‘It was not my magic that was stolen and eaten. Your Sisterhood must give account to the one who gave it. Your transgression that I judge as patron and guardian is that of choosing your own path, despite having chosen to take the path of a Godmother. Will you undo this by following the paths given to you while you journey through Faerie?’

That was not a difficult thing to agree to. Myrtle felt she would be glad to follow any path the Green Lady sent her on.

‘Yes, my lady. I agree.’

There was another long silence while Myrtle felt her inmost being was being scrutinised, but she could not tell from the steady expression on the Green Lady’s face whether she was pleased or disappointed with what she saw.

‘You may rise,’ the Green Lady said at last. ‘You will go to the house of the sorceress. You are not to enter the house; you are only to go as far as the gate. Whomsoever you meet there, you are to give them all you have, then you will carry what you receive back to Highbury where you will break a match that ought not to have been made. You will find yourself in new libraries, search diligently for wisdom to aid you.’

New libraries sounded interesting. ‘Is the match my own ward, my lady?’

‘Your own has been rightly made.’

‘It has?’ This was a surprise.

‘Do not to deviate to the left or the right. If you do, you will break the conditions of your wish.’

Myrtle had many questions; these directions seemed rather vague. But her most pressing question was regarding Rue.

‘Your fellow Sister has her own path,’ the Green Lady said, foreseeing Myrtle’s question. ‘And the margool is in the courtyard.’

The Green Lady now stood, her chair having disappeared.

Joy surged through Myrtle and she stood up, feeling her own chair disappear from beneath her. Rue was well, though on her own path somewhere, and the margool was alive!

‘Had he not the effects of royal magic in his body, he would not have survived the poison,’ said the Green Lady. ‘It had lain in him for too long. My servants have healed him, but take more care over what he eats.’

Myrtle was too happy to do anything but nod. He was alive! She had not killed him by failing to protect him from poison! But the Green Lady’s injunction to watch over his food implied something remarkable.

‘Am I to keep him?’

‘If he has no home, then he has only you.’

Myrtle was unexpectedly happy at this. Why should she be happy? The creature was a terrible responsibility. A dreadful worry. What scrape would he get them into next? And yet... she *was* happy. Delighted. He belonged with her. She had known from the first moment she had set eyes on him. *Him*. She knew he was a him.

A sharp poke in the shoulder jolted her out of her exhilaration.

‘My lady is finished speaking with you,’ the elf-servant said in a low voice. ‘Make your bow and leave with all haste.’

Myrtle bowed, but she had other vital questions to ask. ‘Please, my lady,’ she begged, ‘I believe there is a young man and a donkey—’

‘The doings of misused magic bear only a hope of being undone if you keep to the right path.’

Myrtle felt disappointed with such an unclear answer. She had expected the Green Lady would simply undo the bad spell, or give her some charm or magic or something that would be of direct help.

‘There is also a mushroom fairy from the Silver Woods, my lady. Her husband was stolen by someone called Dame Deathcap. I promised I would bring it to your attention.’

‘There are many weavings in this tangle, Sister Myrtle. Things must be unpicked with care.’

Myrtle would have liked to ask so much more, but she was poked twice as hard the second time, so she stepped away, moving backwards to the door, not by volition, but by the elf’s hand upon her, removing her from the room.

A TEA-VISIT

‘We shall make our visit short,’ Emma said. She and Harriet reached the top of Green Lane. ‘We shall not take a second cup of tea, and I would advise you to refuse any other refreshment offered, for you know how eating gives you the hiccups when you are nervous or in distress.’

Harriet nodded. ‘And it will probably be wedding cake.’

‘We will feel much better once we have got this visit over with. It must be done for appearance’s sake, though it is very disagreeable.’

Emma’s voice and taut posture betrayed her displeasure; she did so hate having to do disagreeable things, though she could not deny that she had some curiosity as to what kind of woman it was who had won Master Elftyn’s disappointed heart with so little time and effort.

There was a good deal of changes made to Master Elftyn’s cottage. Emma noticed the new curtains and cushions. An expensive, if small, turkey carpet replaced the homely rag rug in the middle of the lime-washed floor. New vases brimful with flowers, trinket boxes, lace doilies, a shell screen, and all manner of baubles populated shelves and new little tables. It was not an easy task to make one’s way across the room without catching one’s skirts on some dainty table or potted plant.

‘How delightfully you have arranged things,’ Emma said, as she took her seat opposite the new bride. It would not do to stare, so Emma made do with casting frequent glances at Mistress Elftyn, in between looking about the room and making compliments.

Mistress Elftyn was well looking enough, Emma concluded. Her eyes were a little too close together to be called fine, and her nose a little too long to be called nice, and her jawline a little too square to be called handsome. But the overall effect of her carefully curled hair, her tolerably good teeth, and her healthy bloom of youth was that of a not unattractive young lady. Some might call her pretty. Some might even call her elegant, if they liked a good deal of arrangements. She wore rather a deal of ribbons and ornaments for Emma’s liking, and her gown was trimmed with so much lace and frills that the only word Emma could summon up was *fussy*.

‘Just a few light touches,’ Mistress Elftyn replied, with a toss of her glossy ringlets. ‘As I said to my dear husband, I have no worries at all in removing to so snug an abode as this, I can do as well in a cottage as in a manor, but I *must* have some ornaments about me, and new curtains. There is something about the quality of window dressings that establishes the tone of a home, I always think. And flowers. I cannot live without flowers. I am dotingly fond of flowers. My sister

Selina says I am quite the princess in her bower, always surrounded by flowers.’ Mistress Elftyn laughed at this picture of herself, and Emma tried her best to smile. Harriet only flinched at the word *husband*.

‘I hope you will always enjoy an unfailing supply of flowers,’ Emma said graciously. ‘Our weather has been changeable of late, but generally we are fortunate with a more temperate climate than other parts of the kingdom. A temperate climate does very well for flowers, as does an excellent garden gnome. I believe Master Elftyn employs a garden gnome?’

‘He does. But I have been warned that the fae are unruly in Highbury. I had my concerns on that score, I can tell you. As I said to my dear husband when he was yet my espoused-to-be, I said, do *not* be bringing me to a house with a wayward brownie or a mischievous gnome, I know all about *their* tricks. We had a wayward hob once, and he was the bane of our lives. We had to move away, you know, to another house entirely, for nothing we could do would drive him out. And my good friend, Margaretta Foote, had the most dreadful time with her brownie, shockingly dreadful, fed a whole roast dinner to the pigs and emptied the linen chest into the horse trough.’

‘She must have been a very unusual brownie,’ Emma noted. ‘They are generally so faithful. Of course, one must treat them with respect.’

‘Well this one was unusual, I can tell you – unusually troublesome. My brother-in-law and sister do not trouble with many fae servants. It is becoming old-fashioned. But you cannot help living in so quaint a little place. I am sure you would not have so many fae about you if you could help it.’

Emma took a slow sip of tea to keep her tongue from making a sharp reply.

‘As to garden gnomes,’ resumed Mistress Elftyn, ‘I would sooner grow my own flowers. I had remarkable success with dahlias last year. I am passionately fond of dahlias. My friends tell me I have quite the green finger. Quite a whole hand of green fingers.’ She waggled her right hand so her wedding ring was displayed. ‘I suppose you have a good deal of dahlias in summer? I hear you have very extensive grounds. I left behind the extensive grounds of my brother-in-law’s house when I alighted here.’ She gave a little sigh. ‘Thus having flowers about me makes me feel more at home. As though I still moved through archways and bowers and box hedges. Ah, there I go again, talking of bowers, as though I were the fair princess among her roses!’ Another silly laugh followed, and Emma tried to laugh with her, but it really was too difficult.

‘However,’ Mistress Elftyn said, her eyes narrowing a little, ‘I do find the fae helpful in some aspects. Do you have a good Godmother to hand in Highbury?’

‘There is Mother Goodword,’ replied Emma. ‘Though she is absent at present.’

‘And does she sell her wares to the local ladies?’

‘Sell her wares?’ Emma exchanged a glance with Harriet. ‘She does not sell anything. What kind of wares?’

‘Oh, you know,’ Mistress Elftyn lowered her voice conspiratorially, ‘*ladies*’ things.’

Emma looked at her blankly. ‘Do you mean medicinal treatments? Herbs and charms, and so forth? She does not sell them. You would need to call upon Mistress Perry for such purchases.’

‘A Godmother who does not sell her wares? How odd. We had numerous Godmothers in town who would sell you all manner of ladies’ charms, though one had to know which of them were to be trusted. Some wares were a little shoddy, to be sure. Not all who claim the title of Godmother really *are* a Godmother.’

Mistress Elftyn flashed a quick, but withering look in Harriet’s direction.

‘I had a friend, Clara Bragg, she once bought a charm to alter the colour of her hair, for she was never happy with it, always thought it a little too like oat when she would sooner be wheat with that hint of gold, so she paid a good deal for the charm, it came in a bottle and she was to comb it through her hair, and it turned it wheat-coloured sure enough, but *green* wheat! She was beside herself. Had to forego a full season of balls while it faded. But then she was a little close with money, and I daresay she bartered for the cheapest price. If you want good quality charms, you must pay for them, that is what I always say. I never pay less than a guinea for a ladies’ charm.’

‘I think the Godmothers in the towns must be a little different from the ones in Highbury,’ said Emma, feeling defensive of poor Harriet at her side. ‘I do not think they are in the habit of turning things odd colours or causing mischief, they are of a very superior standard.’

Harriet flinched a second time.

‘But Mistress Perry is of elven birth, and her wares are very well thought of, and I do not think they are unfairly priced.’

‘Do you use Mistress Perry’s charms?’ Mistress Elftyn enquired, examining Emma’s face and hair with a keenness that made Emma bristle. ‘You have wondrous hair, to be sure. And a good complexion. You must use a very high-quality charm. Do you send to town for them?’

‘I use nothing,’ said Emma, her hazel eyes flashing.

‘But you cannot possibly have such luxuriant hair without the use of magic. Or is it a wig?’

Harriet gave a little gasp. Emma managed to maintain her composure. ‘My mother did imbibe some magic that influenced my hair, but I take nothing to maintain it. It does as it wills without my *intrusion*.’ She spoke the last word with distinction. ‘I would not have the *presumption* to interfere with what nature has chosen to bestow.’

Mistress Elftyn cast a languid eye over Emma’s crown of braids again and noted that ringlets were all the fashion now. She scanned Harriet’s fair ringlets, Harriet having curled her hair in honour of this visit, and added that *dark* ringlets in particular were quite the thing.

Harriet had not said a word the whole of the visit, other than a faint ‘thank you’ when handed her tea, and a little ‘no, thank you,’ when the cake was offered, but a small ‘*oh*,’ from her alerted Emma to the entrance of Master Elftyn.

He edged his way towards them, navigating the narrow space between the music stand and the amaryllis in its copper urn, to stand beside his wife’s chair, and make his bow to Mistress Woodhouse, and the barest of nods to Harriet, and to receive Mistress Woodhouse’s congratulation and best wishes for his happiness in his new state.

It was an awkward business. The last time Emma had seen him he had been on his knees in the carriage on Midwinter Eve, making professions of undying love and begging her to be his wife. Now he stood with a mixture of haughty pride and smug satisfaction beside his rapidly acquired bride, as though defying Mistress Woodhouse to think herself a most unfortunate young lady in *not* being the one who now sat, queen of the tea tray, with its smart, new china.

Emma took her leave as quickly as could be done so without rudeness and gave the necessary invitation for Master and Mistress Elftyn to call upon her and her father at Hartfield at their earliest convenience. But she made no offer of invitation for Mistress Elftyn to come before the Green Man to receive the blessing of Hartfield. She could not bring herself to summon up that degree of cordiality.

‘Well!’ said Emma with a mix of satisfaction and relief, as she and Harriet walked back up the lane. ‘That is over, thank goodness. And you acquitted yourself very well. I am proud of you. Not one tear, and only a couple of sighs, but I do not think the princess in her bower heard them.’

EVERY HOPE AND EVERY FEAR

All Rue's senses were alerted to strange and unpleasant sensations once inside the cottage of Dame Deathcap. She did not need to focus on sensing; it was all too palpable: the smell of decay, the taste of bitterness, the shadowy obscuration of light, a crawling sensation upon her skin, and the sound of the witch's cackling, for she seemed to find Rue's entrance something worth gloating over.

'So where are all the slaves, er, servants, you're going to release?' Rue said, looking about. From the outside the cottage was quite large, but inside there was only one modest-sized room. An unpleasant room with dark nooks and blackened thatch and beams overhead. Rue was sure she could see lots of tiny eyes watching her from all these dark places.

'Stoke the fire,' the witch ordered, ignoring the question. Rue put her hand out for the poker and dropped it with a yell as it turned into a black snake in her hand and hissed at her.

'Stop that!' yelled the witch, jabbing a finger at the implements on the hearth; they had all morphed into nasty creatures. 'They like their bit of fun with the new ones.'

Rue stood staring at the poker, now solid and metallic once again.

'Get on with you, it won't bite,' the witch snapped, but Rue was not so sure. The kindling sticks turned momentarily into fat worms, and the tinderbox became a large, warty toad. Rue yelped in surprise each time and the witch yelled back, cursing her fire irons and cursing Rue for not getting the fire going in quick time.

'What shall I do now?' Rue asked, when the fire was roused up at last. The witch had been huddled in a corner of the room, poring over a large book and making scratches on the pages with a quill pen.

'Get the supper on, you twit. What else do you think the fire is for, entertainment?'

'But what about the servants you're to release? Where are they?'

'*Supper!*' shrieked the witch. 'I can't release anyone on an empty belly.'

'And what is for supper?' Rue looked about for something that might be a storage cupboard or chest for food and cooking implements. A blackened cauldron sat on the hearth, and a tripod and hook squatted over the fire, but she could see nothing else to cook with.

'Whatever's in the garden, featherbrain. Fetch the basket by the door.'

There was only one door into the one room. Rue moved towards the door she had come through but the witch yelled out, 'The garden door, you bafflehead!'

To Rue's surprise, a door appeared in what had looked like a dark alcove a moment earlier. She reached for the round doorknob, cautiously, for she half expected it to turn into something with fangs, but it remained a doorknob, and wonderful daylight hit Rue's face as she stepped outside.

Neat rows of flowerbeds, vegetable patches and canes stretched away, but something wasn't right. The climbing beans ought to have been a riot of green with orange flowers and plump pods, not creeping stalks of grey with leaves like charred paper and shrivelled black pods. The rows of frothy carrot tops were spiky, the burst of frilly lettuce heads were squab mounds of black-veined leaves.

'What kind of garden is this?'

Something large and dark moved from behind a row of bean canes, and Rue saw the bear – the very bear she had met in the woods on her first night, except, no, this was a smaller bear, very like the one who lived in the cave, and what was that? An even smaller bear peeked out from behind the first one. A bear and her cub. But were they friendly? Rue had no time to find out, for the door behind her was yanked open and the witch glared at her from the doorway.

'I said get the basket, you ninny, do as you're told!'

'What basket?' Rue turned her back to the witch, looking for a basket, but a swift shove made her stumble forwards, tripping over something in the path, and lying sprawled in the dirt.

'*That* basket,' crowed the witch.

Rue had tripped over a basket of various vegetables and bunches of roots and leaves. The little bear hid its face behind its mother, and the mother bear withdrew behind the canes. Rue picked up the basket and reluctantly went back into the gloom.

A old crone only ate vegetables, Rue thought as she hacked up what looked like carrots, the colour of green and purple bruises, with a dull-edged knife. Strange vegetables though. Something like spinach, but with little black nobbles on the leaves, something like onions, that made her eyes water, but grey with a smell like bad eggs. She threw them all into the cauldron and was about to throw the tops and peelings on the fire.

'What are you doing, you lubberwort?' shrieked the witch, causing Rue to drop her handful of peelings on the hearth. 'Pick them up! Put them in the composter – there's magic in those, you clodhopper!'

'Well how was I to know?' Rue replied with a glare. She was getting fed up of all the name calling and shrieking. These next fifty-six days were going to be hard going indeed if she had to put up with this treatment. A little shock ran through Rue as something struck her on the neck. She put her hand up to feel a thin band, like a fine chain.

'What's this? What've you done?' she cried, trying to see the band, but unable to without a mirror.

'It's your livery,' said the witch, her fingers crackling with magic. 'Now you're really part of the household.'

'What's it for?' Rue hated the feeling of something pressing on her neck.

'To shut you up.' The witch rubbed a finger and thumb together and the yellowish light crawled over her hand. She flicked it at Rue and Rue cried out as a choking sensation gripped her. It only lasted a moment, but it left a throbbing sensation afterwards, like the pain following a bee sting.

'Don't answer back, you mewling frogspawn, none of your sauce. Get some water in that pot and put it on to boil and *don't forget the seasoning!*'

The blow shook Rue. It had not occurred to her till now that the witch might physically torment her as well as having insults and drudgery heaped on her. What kind of creature was she that she could strike someone across the room with a flick

of her fingers? Suddenly Rue felt she was in something a lot deeper and more serious than she had realised, and she swallowed hard, feeling the tight band around her neck as she did so.

She hurried out the back door and found a round door in the ground, indicating a well. She worked quickly to avoid trouble, but all the while she was lowering and drawing up the pail, she was looking about her.

The garden was enclosed by a fence the height of at least two men and made of black wood. It looked as though gnarly trees had melded together to make an impenetrable barrier. Was it dragonwood from the Black Forest? The kind that was so hard, it could not be cut by mortal hands and could not be burnt, even by dragon fire? A good choice for a prison wall then.

She could see no sign of the bears as she trudged back to the house. There were a few rustles from a nearby patch of leaves, as though some small animal or fae were among them. She thought as she closed the creaking door behind her that she heard what sounded like a mournful donkey braying from the far end of the garden, but perhaps it was only the whine and groan of the door.

The pot was boiling, but where was the seasoning? There was nothing to hand that could answer for salt or dried herbs. She returned to the alcove, but no door appeared. She turned to the adjacent wall, and a smaller door materialised, leading to a storeroom where shelves of jars and bags and boxes lined the walls and bunches of drying herbs hung from hooks in the rafters. 'Which one is seasoning?' Rue wondered aloud.

'That one,' said a tiny voice. An elf, the small woodland type, appeared from behind a barrel. She pointed to a wooden box.

'Why are you shut in here?' Rue asked.

'Shhh!' urged the elf, her green eyes wide as she glanced at the door behind Rue. 'I don't want her to remember I'm here.'

'Get out here, you lazy scobberlotch,' came the witch's shrill voice. 'I want my supper!'

'Only put one in,' the elf whispered as Rue took hold of the small box. 'And you will need a cup of those.' She pointed to an opened sack. Rue took the wooden cup from the shelf above the sack and scooped it full. It was something dried and rattly, like lentils or peas.

'Funny looking peas,' Rue commented. They were small and black.

'Not peas,' the elf said, looking away from the cup.

'What then?'

'Never mind,' she whispered, and disappeared back behind the barrel.

The seasoning turned out to be something withered and black. The witch seemed to like to eat a lot of black things. This would be a nasty looking stew. Rue hoped it wasn't to be her supper too. She held one of the shrivelled things between her fingers, wondering what it was. A warning growl from across the room made her drop it into the cauldron and put the lid on. There. She was done cooking. One supper down, and fifty-five more to go.

'Get on with the bread while the pot's cooking. And make my brew. Sweep this mess on the floor. Beat that rug. Mix up some ink. Trim the wicks. Stack up the woodbox. Empty that chamberpot. Sew up this tear. Sharpen my quill. Fetch that book. Not that one, you dunderwhelp. *Where's my supper!*'



M what he always did when troubled with unwelcome thoughts. He walked. He pulled on his gaiters and his stoutest walking shoes, soled with midnight-boar hide, took up his favourite walking stick, a well-smoothed, straight bit of ash, donned his hat and cloak, and set off. He marched through the estate, leaping the swelling brooks, vaulting the stiles, scattering the sprites and gnomes in his path, for he did not notice them in his absorbed state of mind.

There were two mysteries he could not unravel. Two riddles he could not decipher.

One was the mystery of the fresh rise in mischief in the village, the other was the riddle of his heart. And he was hard pressed to know which was the most difficult.

Something had happened recently to cause a new surge of trouble. The darkling bridge was almost solid at the hour of midnight; strengthened by the new release of illicit workings. He had to guard it closely every night. He'd set up the brightest lanterns he could find, to make a border of light along the bank. Some determined darklings took to throwing stones at them from the other side, trying to knock the lanterns and extinguish them. He'd dealt with a good deal of creatures trying their luck in getting over, but they seemed to know what the gleam of his sword was, and hung back in the shadows beyond the bank. Last night one goblin had sneaked past him by swimming across the river and running off towards the mill.

Where was the magic coming from? That was the mystery. Every one of his acquaintance – and he knew everyone in Highbury, from his fellow landowners to the poorest cottagers; from the affluent trade families to the village washerwoman – not one of them showed any sign of alteration in manner or circumstance. Nothing that would indicate the use of magic that did not belong to them. He took the Green Man's injunction to find the thief seriously, knowing just how serious it was to have the protective boundaries breached.

As he strode round the farrowed fields, he saw the stables where young Ben Larkins had worked. What had happened to the poor lad? Master Knightley had set out with his best dog, searching every inch of the village and all the environs within riding distance, looking for a trace or trail. But he'd found nothing, and his dog had picked up no scent beyond the river bank. The Larkins were distraught, and Ben wasn't the only one to disappear from the village. Two of the trainee godmothers at the school had vanished, passed into Faerie of their own will, according to Harriet Smith, the only one left behind. All she would say was that they had gone to seek help from the Green Lady.

Mother Goodword was still inexplicably absent through all this upheaval, and a few weeks ago a pair of strangers had passed through, asking if anyone had seen a young man who had last been seen on the road between Kingston and Highbury on Midwinter morning. It seemed he too had vanished, and it could not be mere uncanny coincidence that the young man and Ben Larkins and the Godmother girls had all disappeared around the same time. There was some connection, but what was it?

He was not one for imagining things; he preferred solid facts and figures to lend his mind to, but it was hard even for him not to imagine the worse, especially if all these young people had fallen onto darkling paths, or been lured away. Any manner of dire fates might have befallen them.

Not for the first time did he consider whether he ought to travel into Faerie himself to see if there were any clues as to the disappearances. But he was not a man of magic and had not the authority of the Wild Man upon him to protect him. That belonged to Master Woodhouse, who would not, or could not, take it up and

use it.

What would Master Woodhouse do if it were Emma who was in danger, rather than only Larkins' son, or Mother Goodword's girls? Would he do something then? Master Knightley hoped with all his heart that such a day would not come to test him, but he was deeply concerned. The witch of the woods was not to be underestimated. He knew well enough what a long memory her type had. They would bear a grudge and bide their time in seeking revenge for centuries, thus a couple of decades would be nothing to the likes of her. If the borders were failing fast, then the dangers increased in equal rapidity.

His tramping brought him into Donwell orchard. He had been drawn without realising it to the ancient apple tree that stood as a giant amid the orchard.

The twigs hummed with life, a golden tinge running through them like a flow of hidden gold. Buds the size of mistletoe berries clustered at their tips. Another week and they would burst into blossom. It did not matter how changeable and uncertain the weather in Highbury was of late, nothing interfered with the innate power of the ancient tree. It would turn in its season without fail.

As he stood in the tree's shade, looking upwards, he recalled the Last Apple of the harvest and wondered what had happened to it.

He recalled the day when Larkins had held out the golden apple, suggesting that it should be Master Knightley who took it that year. The memory of that day was connected to the second riddle of Master Knightley's thoughts. Something had been awakening within him in recent months. Rising like sap in his veins. Thoughts of marriage, thoughts of a different life, thoughts of one particular young woman with hazel eyes for whom his feelings of friendship were now altering and deepening. These were the puzzling feelings now swelling into bud, threatening to burst open into something visible. It was most uncomfortable, this surging, blossoming sensation. Like the buds on the tree, such ideas held promise. But they also held change. In a matter of weeks, the whole orchard landscape would be altered. The bare branches gone. A cloud of blossom would cover all. Like a bridal gown.

But what hope was there of any lasting happiness for anyone if the troubles were not removed.

And who did receive the Last Apple?

DOUBLE DEALING

The witch ate like a pig. Worse than a pig. There were a lot of things about pigs that Rue liked. She could not say the same about the old hag who sat on her fireside chair, scrunching up the little rounds of flat bread Rue had made, crumbling them into her basin of stew. She scraped her spoon; she smacked her lips; she slurped and dribbled and Rue had to look away as globules of black gravy trickled down her chin. She dropped the bowl with a clatter on the floor when she had finished. Wiped her mouth on her sleeve, gave an enormous belch, and said, 'Revoltin'. You're more of a wantwit than I thought.'

Rue almost said, 'Well it can't have been that bad, seeing as you hogged it all up, and it's not half as revolting as you!' But she didn't, though she had to grit her teeth to keep the words at bay. 'What do I eat?' was all Rue said at last, not that she wanted any of the black stew, but she had hoped for one or two of the flatbreads, even if the flour she had found in the storeroom was an unappetising shade of grey; she had made half a dozen of them, but the greedy witch had scoffed the lot.

'Did you not make yourself some supper, dearie? What a pity for you. Now you'll have to wait for breakfast.'

Rue bit back her words, waiting until she could trust herself to speak without insult before saying, 'So now you've had your supper, you can let the other slaves go. That was the deal.'

'I don't have slaves.'

'Servants then. We made an agreement. I was to work for you for two moons, and you was to let all the others go.'

'And you haven't worked two moons yet, have you, dearie?' She cackled and Rue cast her mind back to the conversation, recalling what had been agreed upon.

'We agreed I could go out of the gate once a day,' Rue said, putting her hands on her hips. 'I remember we agreed on that.'

'So we did.'

'Well, I'll just step out now, then. I could do with some better air after choking over that fire.'

'But you said once a day, dearie. And now it's evening.'

'Evening already?' Rue went to the grimy little window to peer out. It was dusky outside.

'Doesn't time fly when you're having fun.' Another round of cackling.

'So what are my working hours?' Rue asked. 'Six 'til six is the usual hours for a servant. It must be six by now.'

'You'll work what hours I see fit.' The witch's voice was garbled, as she picked her teeth with a splinter of kindling. She pulled out one of the little black peas and looked at it on the end of the pick. 'Pesky bat's eyes always get stuck,' she mumbled before eating the eye and tossing the pick into the fire. She got up from

the fireside chair with a grunt. 'Well then,' she muttered, 'best get to work, or the trolls will have all the fun. Get my cloak, you spoony. What are you gaping at?'

Rue had been staring out of the window feeling a wave of misery and entrapment flood her. She snatched up the witch's cloak, which momentarily turned into a pair of giant bat wings, and flung it at the witch, not liking the feel of it.

'Temper,' snarled the witch. 'I won't have it.'

'I don't care for bat's eyes nor bat's wings,' protested Rue.

'Behave yourself,' the witch said to her cloak, which immediately resumed its usual folds of black wool.

'My mount,' said the witch. Rue handed her the broom, her hand hesitating before she took hold of it, in case it should turn into something else. But it remained a wooden handle.

A faint glimmer of hope arose in Rue's mind. The witch was going out, which meant that Rue could have some time alone. Could go into the garden at least, could have some respite from the hideous crone's company.

'Bed for you,' said the witch, jerking her head at the wall.

Rue looked round, half expecting to see a bedroom appear, but all she saw was a cage, filling the length of the wall. The bars emerged before her eyes. One moment there was only a wall of wooden slats, and the next moment there were bars of black wood from floor to roof, with a narrow, open door. The door to the garden creaked open, and the witch called out, 'In you get, you snivelling bunch of guttersnipes.'

A troop of creatures came through the door, heads bent, shoulders stooped, and filed into the cage to stand huddled in the corner.

Rue moved as far from the cage door as she could get.

'Get in, you mooncalf,' growled the witch. 'I haven't got all night.'

'Don't put me in there,' Rue begged. 'I have a thing about being closed up. I'll just sit on that chair and not move till you get back, I—'

'I said *in*, frogbelly!' She poked Rue hard in the shoulder with the handle of the broom. So great was Rue's anxiety, that she ignored the blow and refused to move. The hag's sharp nails bit into her arm as Rue was dragged forwards and shoved into the cage, the door closing behind her.

The witch glared round at them all as she put up her hood. Rue swung round to the cage door, gripped the bars in panic, and howled as she received a rap on her knuckles from the broom handle.

'You can play all you like, House,' said the witch, as she left. A small voice gave a muffled cry of dismay as everything in the room rippled with movement. The gargoyles on the chair began leering and calling out insults; the poker reared up into a hissing snake; the wooden bowl on the hearth turned into a spider the size of a bowl and scuttled up the walls to swing back and forth in front of the cage on a silken thread.

The sound of the witch's laughter was heard long after the cottage door slammed behind her.

'Did you have to annoy her,' said the small voice who'd cried out. 'You can't make a fuss about anything. Just do as you're told, or she'll get really nasty.'

Rue didn't reply, she was too busy trying to control the rising anxiety she felt at finding herself in a cage. It was the one thing she could not bear. It was her worst nightmare. She felt the tingling sensation of an approaching faint and her breath grew shallow and desperate.

'*Breathe*,' said a deep voice that did not sound human. It was the large bear, sat on the floor, because the cage was not high enough for it to stand upright. The bear

cub was huddled up beside it, and next to the bear cub sat a familiar face. Ben Larkins was on all fours, swinging his handsome curly head from side to side in a gesture of misery. Of course, it was only Ben Larkins' body. It was really Jack the donkey whose eyes were rolling around.

'I... can't!' gasped Rue, closing her eyes to shut out the sight of the swinging spider, who grinned at her through the bars. She sank down to the floor in case the faint did come upon her.

'It won't bite,' the small voice said. Rue, still gasping for air, opened her eyes to see a little man, the size of a human child. A mushroom fairy, judging by the look of him. He was slumped on the floor in a posture of defeat. 'It just likes to tease us. Nothing can get in or out of here once she's shut the door.'

That was not what Rue needed to hear; it wasn't the spider causing her to feel as though she would die, she would soon put her boot on a spider, no, it was the locked door and bars that were the torment.

'*Breathe,*' said the deep, sad voice of the bear. '*Dawn... will... come.*'

'Can I help?' said a new voice. It was the little elf from the storeroom.

'Prisstine!' exclaimed the mushroom fairy. 'You're alive! We thought she'd put you in the composter.'

'She put me in the storeroom, saying she would compost me, but so far she hasn't remembered I'm there.'

Rue opened her eyes again just in time to see the poker-snake slithering swiftly across the floor, opening its mouth behind the little elf, as though to swallow her up. '*Leeowwll!*' Rue shouted, meaning to say, '*Look out!*' but her words getting mangled in her terror and shortness of breath.

Just as the snake made to snap its jaws upon the elf, and Rue was about to faint with the awfulness of it all, the elf turned and said, 'In the name of the Green Lady, get gone!' And the snake turned into a poker and clattered to the floor.

The elf drew closer to the bars, and said, 'Peace, in the name of the Green Lady.'

Rue felt something settle upon her at the mention of that name. She still felt dreadful, but the terror abated, and she could breathe properly, and the faintness passed gradually away.

'What just happened?' Rue said weakly. 'How did you make the poker stop like that?'

'I am a servant of the Green Lady,' said the elf sadly. 'I have the authority to use her name on darkling works.'

'Does it work on everything round here?' asked Rue hopefully. 'Does it work on the witch?'

'Sadly not. She is too powerful for me. I can only interfere in her small workings. I am a healing elf by gifting. I can impart some wellbeing to you all, but only a small measure, for my power is limited here in this darkness.'

'She's been keeping us alive for years,' the mushroom fairy said.

'Years?' repeated Rue. 'You've been here for years?'

'It feels like it,' said the fairy.

'Can't you escape?' said Rue to the elf who shook her head, and put a hand to her neck where Rue saw the gleam of a fine band, just like her own bond. 'There must be something to be done. She can't be all-powerful? And why doesn't the Green Lady come and get you herself?'

Rue felt a rush of anger towards the Green Lady, who had abandoned folk to suffer under the foul witch. And then she remembered she had been sent to free them.

‘I’ve to work for two moons for the old hag,’ she told them. ‘And then you’ll all be free to go. That’s the agreement I made with her.’

She expected there would be some excitement at this news, but ten eyes: four bear ones, two donkey-in-a-man’s-body, two fairy and two elfen ones stared gloomily back at her.

‘She agreed,’ Rue said, thinking they had not heard her properly. ‘The witch agreed to the terms. I’m to work for two moons in exchange for you all going free. The Green Lady sent me,’ she added.

There was a flicker of interest from the fairy and elf when she mentioned the Green Lady, but they still did not look cheered.

‘Which moons?’ the mushroom fairy asked.

‘What do you mean?’ Rue frowned. ‘Two moons are just that. Two moons. Two months from today. What is the moon tonight? Is it full yet? I must take note, so I know how many days have passed. Fifty-six,’ she said slowly, thinking that fifty-six sounded like fifty-five and a half days far too long.

‘It’s a worm moon,’ said the mushroom fairy, ‘in three days.’

‘Worm moon?’ echoed Rue. ‘But that’s in March. It’s only just gone Midwinter.’

‘It’s a worm moon in three days,’ repeated the fairy.

‘Three days till full moon,’ Rue said, fixing the date in her mind. It was a vitally important date. The most important date of her life so far.

‘It will be a year till the next worm moon.’

Rue felt her skin prickle. ‘But... no... surely not...’ She looked from the fairy to the elf; both looked back at her with the same hopeless expression. ‘You don’t think she’s tricked me into two years... has she?’

She already knew the answer to her question. The old hag would trick her in any way she could.

‘Blundering Bearcubs and Merciful Mushrooms!’ groaned Rue. ‘What a great lummo I am.’

The bear cub gave a soft growl of protest.

‘Merciful mushrooms,’ said the mushroom fairy. He sighed. ‘What I would give to have some of those.’

‘It won’t be as long as two years before she remembers about me,’ said the elf. ‘I shall be composted on the next new moon, for certain.’

The mother and baby bear groaned in their growly, deep voices, and Ben-who-was-really-Jack gave a mulish whimper and slumped to the floor.

Rue sat dazed on the floor, watching the fanged spider swing back and forth.

A LINE OF SHIFTS AND EXPEDIENTS

It was so dark in the witch's cottage, the small window being thick with grime, that it was hard to discern dawn. Rue thought it must still be the middle of the night when she awoke. She had been dreaming of a hideous ogre poking her in the ribs, saying that she would make a tasty breakfast for him. She opened her eyes to find that she actually was being jabbed in the ribs, and the witch was screeching, 'Up you, slugabed! Get my breakfast!'

Rue was amazed that she had slept at all. She must have dropped off through exhaustion at some point. The bears were shuffling out into the garden, and the mushroom fairy hurried out after them. Only Ben-who-was-Jack remained in the cage, making anxious brays and turning in circles as though he did not know how to find the way out.

'Out, you great boil-brain, or I'll put you into a beetle body and step on you! Out! Noisy brute!'

Rue covered her ears, for being brayed at in close quarters was deafening. She helped steer Jack out of the cage and into the garden, longing to be out there herself, for though it was dark and chilly in the early morning, it was better than the confines of a cage.

'Breakfast!' shrieked the witch.

Rue hurried to the storeroom. 'What should I make her for breakfast?' She whispered toward the barrel in the corner.

'A cupful of that,' said the elf, poking her head round to point at a sack. 'Make it up like porridge. Don't forget to add one of those.' She meant the black shrivelled-up things in the little box.

'What are they?' Rue asked.

'Deathcaps. You must put one in.'

'What happens if I don't?'

'She gets cruel and nasty.'

'She's already cruel and nasty.'

'You haven't seen her being really cruel and nasty,' the elf whispered, her eyes large with fear.

'I need to eat too,' said Rue, suddenly reminded of this by a wave of weakness passing over her. It had been a whole day since her last meal.

'Eat nothing from the cauldron,' the elf warned. 'The traces of deathcap would poison you. And eat nothing from the garden. This is her black garden. Everything is poisonous to mortals.'

'So what *do* I eat?'

'Take a cup of that meal and bake yourself a little loaf,' the elf suggested. 'It won't taste good, but it will keep you alive. Eat it while she sleeps. She always has a nap after breakfast.'

‘You should escape while she’s asleep,’ Rue said. But the elf only shook her head. Rue was about to ask more questions about escape plans, but the witch screeched out, ‘Get out here, you plaguesore! What are you about?’

‘She needs her deathcap,’ the elf said, trembling all over. ‘Best be quick.’ She disappeared behind the barrel, and Rue hurried out to make deathcap porridge.

The witch ate her breakfast no less unmannerly than she ate supper. When she seemed a little improved in mood, due to a full belly, Rue plucked up courage to say, ‘I will take my walk this morning. As agreed.’

‘Walk? What are you blethering on about, you bafflehead?’

Rue stood straight, feeling determined to gain her rights. ‘One of the conditions you agreed to was that I could step outside the gate once a day. I *need* to have a walk. I said I’d work for two moons, and I will, but I want my walk. Oh, and while we’re at the subject of conditions, I’ll just make it clear that two moons is just that – two moons. Monthly ones.’

Rue did not think the cunning gleam in the witch’s eye was a good sign, but she continued to stand tall. ‘Our agreement was in the name of the Green Lady,’ said Rue firmly.

A hiss. ‘Don’t say that name!’ The witch uncurled from her chair. ‘So you want to step outside, do you? Go on then.’

The cottage door creaked open. Rue hesitated, half expecting that the witch would slam the door shut before she reached it, but it remained open. She stepped outside.

‘I don’t suppose you could make the garden look, you know, pretty?’ Rue looked about at the bare earth, the withered trees, and the fence of dull bones with that horrible skull in the gate grinning at her.

‘I don’t do pretty if there’s no one to draw in,’ said the witch. ‘My pretty garden is elsewhere.’

It was only a few strides to the gate. Rue did not like touching it, but she had to if she wanted to go beyond it. She took a step outside, feeling a surge of relief that the witch at least hadn’t tricked her on this agreement, when a choking sensation stopped her mid-stride. She had only taken one step, but try as she might she could not move forward one step more. If she did, the pressure on her throat became unbearable.

She wheeled round, furious with the cackling witch. ‘Let me go!’ she shouted. ‘We had an agreement! In the name of the—’ Another squeeze on her throat silenced her.

‘I told you – *don’t say that name!*’ The witch’s fingers crackled with yellow light.

Rue rarely cried, but tears of vexation and anger now welled up. ‘You lying, thieving, nasty, stone-hearted, black-tongued, vile old hagwitch!’ she yelled through her tears.

The witch squealed with laughter. ‘That’s it, dearie! First decent thing I’ve heard you say since you got here. We’ll make something out of you yet!’



‘S

Master Knightley sounded caustic.

‘You dislike Frank Charmall, is that so, Master Knightley?’ said Emma. ‘Confess. You think him flighty.’

‘I think him inconsistent and insincere. I think there is something not altogether honest about him. I think him something of a coxcomb and a peacock, all beset about with charms to make him handsome and agreeable, but I see through them. There, I have said it, are you satisfied?’

Emma searched his face for any hint of a playful smile, but Master Knightley seemed to mean what he said. They took another turn around the shrubbery walk, Emma saying that she wished to make the most of the April sunshine; with the weather so changeable, one could not know when spring sunshine would melt into wintry sleet once again. She knew that Master Knightley paid no heed to the weather in relation to walking out; he always declared any weather fit for walking if one had the right boots on. He marched on, and Emma had to quicken her pace to keep step with him.

‘Why do you despise him?’ she pressed.

‘I do not *despise* him. That is too strong a feeling for a someone I have no inclination to give my thoughts to. I try not to think of him at all.’ He marched faster, then stopped abruptly. ‘But tell me this, Emma,’ and he turned to face her, causing her to halt mid-stride. ‘Tell me why a man of four-and-twenty cannot find his way to his own father’s house in all these years, and suddenly he is here every other week?’

‘Hardly every other week!’ Emma laughed. ‘It has been all of seven, nay, eight weeks, since we saw him last.’

‘But now he talks of removing close by that he might ride over any day. What is the newfound attraction that draws him here? How is it he is suddenly at liberty to come as often as he chooses, after all his protestations of being kept away by his aunt’s indomitable will?’

‘Now that he has found his way here, and met Mistress Weston, and made friends of us all – almost all – he wishes to return. What could be more natural? You read too much into it, Master Knightley, which is not like you one bit. Fanciful imaginings are my forte, not yours.’ She continued walking, determined not to walk faster than she wished. Master Knightley fell back into step with her, slowing his pace. When he spoke again his tone was more thoughtful.

‘Have you considered there may be another attraction in Highbury drawing him here?’

‘Such as?’

It crossed Emma’s mind that he was talking of *her* being the attraction that drew Frank Charmall back. If pressed, she could not deny that it was a possibility. In fact, she considered that it *was* the case.

‘Are you among the friends he has made that he wishes to return so quickly to?’ Master Knightley spoke quietly.

It was not like him to tread on delicate subjects in this way. What did it mean? But then, he had not been himself for many months. No one had, but he more than most. She suspected he carried more cares upon him than he owned to with his vigilant guard of the boundary.

‘What is it that troubles you, Master Knightley? Is it really Frank Charmall, or is it something else?’

She thought he would not answer. They walked on in silence for some minutes; he making little forays as he crossed from one shrub to another, as though examining them, then circling back to her. She kept her steady, composed direction. He spoke at last, returning to her side.

‘The boundaries are very weak now,’ he said. ‘That troubles me most. My concern is that more powerful darklings will soon cross into Highbury. I’m vexed

almost beyond words that I cannot do anything about it. We were charged to find the thief that began all this, and I have failed.'

'We have all failed,' said Emma. 'So we must redouble our efforts. I confess I have been distracted at times,' she faltered, as the cause of her distractions came before her – all that nonsense with Harriet and Master Elftyn for one – 'but I will exert myself to find out what I can. If it is someone in Highbury who has done this, we ought to find them. They must be a very clever practitioner of magic to have eluded detection. I have noticed nothing untoward other than the general mischief, and Harriet and I have visited most of the households in the village, sensing for magic or some clue. We have not many houses left to call at.'

'I wonder if I ought to seek help from someone who does have power,' said Master Knightley.

'Such as? You cannot go before the Green Man, even if he would show himself to you, for we have not done as he bid in finding the thief.' A horrible thought struck her. 'You would not go into Faerie, Master Knightley? You would not endanger yourself?'

'I don't quite know what to do. Not yet.'

This was a new concern. No one who went into Faerie without protection returned unaltered. Or if they did, it was often many years later. She could not bear the thought of Master Knightley being lost to them for years. Perhaps forever.

They walked on; he circling away again in his restlessness then coming back to her side. The house was in sight now, and Emma could see her father at the window looking out for them.

'We must take care not to show Papa our concern,' Emma said, arranging her own features into a neutral expression.

'Emma,' Master Knightley said, touching her arm.

She stopped, arrested by the gravity in his voice. 'Yes?'

'Will you promise me something?'

She did not answer immediately, not liking to make promises to anyone, not even Master Knightley, unless she knew what she was binding herself to.

'Promise me that if any trouble comes from over the border, that you will keep yourself safe within the Green Man's protection?'

'What could come over the border that would threaten me?'

'You know what threat it is that I fear for you. You are the particular target of a most malicious creature.'

'Oh, not that old story about the witch.' She tried to laugh the idea away, but Master Knightley remained grave. She did not like to leave him in such anxiety over her, so she made a concession: 'If I promise, will you likewise promise not to put yourself in any danger? You will not go into Faerie?'

He took longer than she liked to answer. 'I will not go into Faerie *unprotected*. I have not the smallest desire to go at all. Only necessity would compel me to such action. But I ask you to protect yourself, Emma, if required. Please.'

'I won't be shut up in the tower,' said Emma. 'I cannot bear it. I spent too long up there as a child.'

'I don't ask that. I always argued with your father over your immurement. But remain in the Great Hall if there is any sighting of the witch in Highbury. I could not bear to see harm come to you, Emma. No more than your father could.'

She met his look of entreaty. 'Nor I to you. Very well. I promise.'

'Good.' He drew his shoulders back, as though a weight had fallen from them. He summoned a smile, and the lines of worry smoothed a little from his brow. 'Let me talk business with your father for a half hour. It is a good distraction for him.'

‘Please do.’ She smiled back and took his arm. Now they were arm in arm, they could walk in step with one another the rest of the way. If only they could always be so in step. What cared she for the movements of Frank Charmall or the dangers of some darkling goblin or silly old witch when she had such a friend at her side? The world would surely come right once again, very soon. Mild, quiet little Highbury could not be troubled for long. Her little world had always been so smooth and certain, that even her active imagination could not summon up any scene so terrible as Master Knightley seemed to envision.

All would be well. The thief would make a misstep that revealed his identity, the Green Man appeased, and the boundaries restored. Mother Goodword had to return sometime soon, and would know how to find the missing young people. And meantime, if Frank Charmall were coming again on regular visits, there would surely be a revival of their plans for a ball.

A new matchmaking idea had come to her recently. A new match for poor Harriet. Perhaps Frank and Harriet would dance together and realise how perfectly suited they were to one another. There was nothing like a ball for rousing up romance. It was only a pity that Master Knightley was not fond of dancing.

But now an image of Master Knightley and Jane Fairfayce flashed before her mind. They were dancing together, hands clasped, eyes locked – *dear me, I hope it is not a foretelling!* The image was so disagreeable that she made a little cry of protest, alarming Master Knightley, and forcing her to pretend that it was due to swallowing a bug.

Perhaps it was not a bad thing that Master Knightley did not dance, not if it spared him from dancing with Jane Fairfayce.

THE ZEAL OF A FRIEND

Myrtle had shed tears at the reunion with the margool whelp. He had bounced into the courtyard of the Green Lady's palace looking as pleased to see her as she was him.

A line of elves watched him go, their admiration evident.

'Where is his chain?' Myrtle asked the elf who led the creature out, seeing the thin band around the margool's neck was gone.

The elf gave a look of disdain. 'Such a creature ought not to be chained,' he said.

'But how will I keep him safe?' Myrtle said. 'He's escaped once already.'

'No doubt to find you,' said the elf.

This was a new thought to Myrtle.

'He has chosen you as his bond,' the elf said. 'He won't leave you.'

'Bond?' Myrtle repeated, feeling partly pleased at this news, and partly annoyed that she did not know what it meant.

'Take good care of him,' the elf counselled. 'He is rare.'

'What do you know of him?' Myrtle asked. 'What exactly is a margool?'

But the elves turned away and were gone, in the swift-vanishing manner of the fae.

The margool looked better than she had ever seen him, his dulled scales gleamed as polished jade, his red eyes were bright as fire. Even his puffs of smoke were denser, larger, and a deeper hue. She wondered that he should be the colour of jade, when formerly he had been blue. But his colour shifted back to blue once they left the palace grounds.

His wings flapped and stretched out; he could still only lift from the ground a foot or so, but it was the beginnings of flight.

She felt a little tearful at seeing him alive. It was not like her to feel so much emotion. 'I'm turning into sentimental mush,' she sniffed, patting her pockets to see if she had a handkerchief about her, but she did not, so she had to make do with a corner of her cloak. Her very dirty cloak, she having slept in it and travelled in it for – how many days? – she hardly knew how long. Time had a different feel in Faerie.

'Well, no use standing here like a lummo, as Rue would say. Which way now?' She searched diligently for the seven-league path she had arrived on, but it was not to be found. Evidently the Green Lady did not wish her to use it on her journey back. That was vexing, in that she would have to travel slowly, but also something of a relief. The seven-league path was a wondrous thing, but the travel sickness was dreadful, and her boots had still not dried out. Only the silvery fair folk path glinted here and there amongst the grass.

She cast her mind back to the Green Lady's instructions. She was to go to the house of the sorceress. Where was that? She looked around, hoping for someone

who could direct her, feeling cross at herself for not thinking of getting directions earlier. But the meadow she stood in was empty of anything save grass and meadow sprites. She thought back to the *Mappe of Faerie* she had studied so carefully. There had been nothing on it to mark the house of a sorceress. But the Green Lady may have called her a different name, for the Mappe called the Green Lady the Enchantress of the West on some maps, and the Guardian of the Green Lands on others and the queen of May on others. Nothing in Faerie was ever simple.

‘Do I go north or south?’ Myrtle wondered aloud. She turned in a slow circle. ‘Or east or west?’ Then she recalled the little mushroom fairy – how could she have forgotten so soon? The mushroom fairy had said that the sorceress went by the name of Dame Deathcap, and Myrtle had deduced that this Deathcap sorceress was one and the same as the old witch of the Wild Woods.

‘South it is,’ said Myrtle, looking at her shadow to determine which way to go. ‘Keep to the Green Lady’s lands, and all will be well.’ And off she set, a tall figure with a long stride, her black hair streaming behind her, having lost her knitting needle during the bodily shock of the seven-league journey.

The margool hopped and leaped about her, as though delighted to be free from the constraints of the chain, and delighted to be with her again. Her cloak billowed behind her in the afternoon breeze that had picked up. Her eyes were brighter in Faerie air than they had ever been in England, and a deeper shade of blue. She was a striking figure as she marched along with her margool at her side; anyone observing her might conclude she was of fae blood, and no mere mortal. Her eyes blazed with her determination to do just as she had been counselled, for the lives of everyone she cared for might very well depend upon it.



W in a perpetual atmosphere of gloom, one becomes gloomy. Rue felt herself sinking in spirits with every day and night that passed. She moved mechanically through her duties, cooking, cleaning, laying fires, fetching and carrying wood and water. Some days the witch would pick garden produce and make up ointments or potions from it, or carry the produce away in her basket. She would leave her broomstick behind, throwing over herself the glamour of an old peddler woman as she set off on whatever mischief she was about. Rue pitied any who was taken in and persuaded to buy any vile produce of hers.

What a cruel and evil thing it was to take away light and freedom from a person. Why had the Green Lady abandoned her here? She’d been tricked. She had thought she was being sent to save everyone, instead she was only sent to join them in their misery. Even the Green Lady was as tricky as any other fae. They were all the same.

‘The Green Lady is good,’ the little elf whispered to her when Rue entered the storeroom mumbling her complaints.

‘Stop telling me that?’ snapped Rue. ‘You’d have to be deluded to believe it.’

‘I know her,’ insisted the elf. ‘And she is good.’

‘If she’s so good, why are we here? She don’t owe me nothing, but you’re one of her own folk, so why are you left here to rot?’

‘I am not rotting,’ said the elf. ‘I am alive. And so are you.’

‘Only ’til the old hag remembers you,’ Rue reminded her. ‘And what’s the point in being alive if all you feel is *this*?’ She swept her hand in a circle above her head to indicate the gloomy cottage and the thick, grey dust that settled on everything,

and the constant scratching and rustling of unseen creatures.

‘Do not give up hope. You have met the Green Lady. You have stood in her green light, have you not?’

‘I did once. And it was all very nice while it lasted, but what good’s that to me now? She sent me off on a fool’s errand and I’ll never see light nor green again.’

At these words the longing for sunlight and greenness and sweet flowers and open space and friends and honey bees and dancing and music was such a sharp desire that it pierced her and a pair of hot, fat tears rolled down her face and drop to the dusty ground.

‘It is good to cry,’ said the elf.

‘What nonsense you talk,’ muttered Rue between sniffs. She made no attempt to wipe the tears away. She did not notice that as each drop hit the ground, it made a little speck of light, scattering the grey dust.

‘Tears from a mortal maiden are powerful,’ said the elf. ‘They can heal. Let them fall, little Godmother.’

The name arrested Rue. ‘Why do you call me that? I ain’t a Godmother. I ain’t even a student anymore. I failed. My gran used to call me can-do-Rue, now I’m just good-for-nothing-Rue.’ Fresh tears gathered at the remembrance of her gran.

There was no time for the elf to answer, for a screeching voice came from the room beyond. ‘Where’s my breakfast, you good-for-nothing, boil-brained snallygaster?’



What she expected would be her last night in Faerie under a bush. Not any old bush, but a bush with a very obliging sprite, who had agreed to Myrtle’s request for shelter, once Myrtle explained she had been sent on her journey by the Green Lady. She’d found that mentioning this, while travelling through the Green Lady’s lands, was very helpful. Shelter was usually bestowed in the form of a springy mattress of Faerie moss; branches of trees and bushes would overarch her and twine tightly together to make a rain-proof shelter. Little brooks and pools of water would appear when she expressed her need to drink or wash, and fruit and nuts would obligingly show themselves when she grew hungry. She even came across a loaf of steaming bread, sitting on a rock, on one occasion, and a bowl of curds and whey on another. What a difference it made to have the name of a person of importance to open the way.

She’d avoided the paths to the hamlets and villages, having ventured through one village and not liking the attention she attracted, or rather the attention the margool attracted. Most fae-children ran away crying out that a dragon was on the loose, but the older fae recognised it as a margool and stopped her to admire and wonder at him. Each time she asked the same question: ‘What exactly is a margool?’

‘Why, a margool is a margool,’ was the usual reply.

But now she had reached the edge of the Green Lady’s lands. She crossed the Rushy Brook as soon as the sun was high enough to scatter any trolls, then followed the thin trail of a path through the Wild Woods until she came to the crossroad. Ahead lay the path back to Highbury; to the right were the depths of the woods, where bears were said to live, and to her left the path grew very dark beneath the thorn trees. That was the way she must go.

The house sat like a brooding beast amid its barren front garden. Half dead trees twisted their branches up, making shapes like men in torment, their limbs contorted and withering.

After walking for many days through the Green Lady's lands, this murky dell was a grim place. There was a tangible heaviness in the air even before the cottage came in view, and the margool's smoke was red and dark. He ceased his flitting about, and walked closely at Myrtle's heels.

Myrtle did not go directly to the gate made of bones, but stood behind a tree, observing the house, wondering what the Green Lady had meant when she said Myrtle would meet someone at the gate. Who else was there to meet but the witch? It was a strange quest to be sent on, and now that she was not within the influence of the Green Lady, she began to doubt why she had been sent here at all. It made no sense. Had she misunderstood? Had she misheard the directions? Or worse, had the Green Lady played her falsely? Had she been tricked?

But that was an unwelcome thought; she must not think such things. How readily dark thoughts grew while in the vicinity of this dark habitation, it took effort to keep them at bay. She must focus on the task at hand. She would wait to see who, if anyone, came to the gate. Her stomach gave a little lurch, for the cottage door was opening at that very moment! No doubt the witch could tell when someone was close by. Was she coming out to snatch her, as she had done outside the Silver Woods?

Myrtle stood as still as a tree trunk, her black hair and cloak helping to hide her, blending her form among the near-black bark and leaves.

The witch was coming down the path, straight to the gate. Coming slowly, shuffling as though walking was weary work, or as though she wanted to make the walk last as long as possible.

Her hood was up, hiding her face. She seemed taller than Myrtle remembered. She seemed stouter too. And there was something very familiar about the pair of scuffed short boots beneath the cloak...

'Rue?' said Myrtle in amazement, stepping out from behind the tree. 'Is that you?'

The cloaked figure paused, as though listening, then continued walking slowly until she reached the gate and her hand rested upon the latch. It was not the gnarly hand of the witch; it was a young hand, a large hand, the hand of someone used to hard work, it *was* Rue!

Myrtle was at the gate in a moment. 'What are you doing here?'

Rue stared back in amazement; her hood fell down and Myrtle was shocked at her friend's appearance. 'Rue, what's happened? What has she done to you? Get out here, we're leaving this instant!'

'Myrtle!' Rue's voice was a gasp. 'Blundering Bearcubs, it's right good to see you! But, no! It's right bad to see you – it's terrible. You must go and go quick! She mustn't find you.' Rue cast an anxious look back at the house.

'I'm not going without you,' said Myrtle, wondering why Rue didn't rush out of the gate and run off with her. 'You're not...' a horrible thought struck her, 'bound, are you?'

Rue nodded miserably.

'But how? What happened?'

Rue shook her head. Her dark brown locks hung limply about her face, and her cheeks were pale. But it was the look in her eyes that was the worst. Bright, cheerful Rue, always up for an adventure, finding happiness in everything, bouncing, blundering, bold, fearless Rue – where was she? The girl before her was

almost quivering with fear; hollow-eyed and hopeless.

Myrtle pulled open the gate, 'Come on, let's run for it.'

'I can't. And you have to go. I couldn't bear to see you caught. Please, Myrtle, go while you can.'

'What has that old hag done to you?' Myrtle felt indignation rising.

'I have to work for her for two months... or two years,' Rue said. 'If I last that long...' her voice trailed away and her head drooped.

Myrtle grasped Rue's arm and tugged her through the gate, determined to get her away. Rue, caught off balance by Myrtle's sudden snatch, staggered forward a step then gave such a cry of pain that Myrtle let go immediately, shocked at Rue's anguished expression.

'Rue! What's wrong? It's magic – you can't leave, can you? Oh, Merciful Mushrooms, this is dreadful!'

'I can't go more than one step past the gate,' said Rue, when she had regained her breath. She clung to the grisly gate post, her other hand tugged at some thin cord about her neck.

Myrtle's thoughts raced. What could she do? She groaned inwardly that she had no power, no magic. Perhaps she should go back to the Green Lady and beg for Rue's release, but the Green lady had charged her to not to deviate to the left or the right. If she did, she would break the conditions of her wish.

What else was it she was to do when she reached this house? She was not to enter, only to go as far as the gate, and then she was to give all she had to the person she met.

'Please go, Myrtle,' gasped Rue.

'I'll go,' Myrtle said, not wanting to cause Rue any more suffering. 'But I'll be back, and we'll get you out of here, Rue, I promise!'

Rue did not show much sign of hope. What had that evil old witch done to her friend? In that moment Myrtle understood the power of darklings. It was not something to treat as a curiosity. It was something to be countered. It was the very opposite of life. Of light, of love, of hope.

'I have to give you something before I go,' Myrtle rummaged through her large pocket attached to her gown. She only had two items in it: her pocket knife, and the little package the mushroom fairy had given her.

There was a sound from inside the house. A horrible screeching voice: '*Get back here, you gooseneck trollop!*'

'Oh no, she's awake!' Fear was in Rue's eyes. 'Go! Right now!'

'All right, but take these!' Myrtle thrust the little knife and package into Rue's hands. There was something else she was supposed to do. What was it? *Carry what you have been given back to your home in Highbury.* 'Have you something for me?' she pressed. 'I'm to carry something back to Highbury.'

Myrtle had already stepped back inside the gate and dropped the latch. 'What am I to do with these?' she asked sadly, looking at the knife and parcel in her hand.

'I don't know. But the knife is fae-made, it will cut through anything, and the parcel has merciful mushrooms in it. Eat one, it will make you feel well.'

That seemed a futile thing to say. It would take more than a merciful mushroom to remove Rue's suffering.

'Have you something for me?' Myrtle urged.

Rue was moving away. She shook her head. 'I don't have nothin'. But...' she glanced quickly at the house again, 'but warn them in Highbury, warn the Woodhouses. The witch is plotting something against Mistress Woodhouse, I don't know what, but I hear her muttering spells and things over them. Something about

rampion leaves and hair. Warn them to protect themselves. I think she's coming for 'em.'

The witch's voice shrieked again, and Rue broke into a stumbling run. She looked back once when she reached the door, before shutting it. The image burned in Myrtle's mind all the way back – the dreadful image of Rue's pale, hopeless expression as she stood in the dark doorway.

IMPOSSIBLE THINGS

Rue trembled on returning to the cottage after seeing Myrtle. She trembled lest the witch went after Myrtle. That would be unbearable, but the witch had only awakened in her usual crabby mood to demand her second meal of the day.

Seeing Myrtle so unexpectedly had roused up so many feelings, it reminded her of how much she missed her friends, her family, Mother Goodword – would she ever see them again? Would she be free in two years? – oh, it seemed as an eternity, she could not endure two years living under this oppression of darkness. The witch scattered nothing but heaviness and despair in her wake; she was pitiless, merciless, how was it she had not a mote of goodness in her whole being? She had been a mortal, no doubt magic had been in her bloodline, but surely, she had once known feelings of compassion and friendship for fellow mortals, had she not?

‘Have you ever had a friend?’ Rue said, speaking impulsively, forgetting to check herself.

The witch was at her little table, with her heavy tome opened upon it as she scratched out words with her bald quill, muttering spells and curses. Rue was at the fireplace stirring the disgusting mess that the witch called dinner.

‘No such thing,’ said the witch, her quill still moving.

‘No such thing as a friend? Not true.’

‘Shut up and hurry with my dinner, you ninnyhammer.’ The witch’s quill paused from its scraping. ‘Are you thinking of your little friend?’ Her voice turned sly.

Rue was startled, and almost dropped the ladle into the cauldron. Had the witch seen Myrtle? She flashed a glance at the old crone; she was cast in shadow, but her eyes made a horrible gleam. Rue said nothing in reply, but stirred more vigorously.

‘Did you think I had forgotten her?’

‘Forgotten... who?’ Rue stammered.

‘I am only waiting till new moon, when all is black. Then into the compost she shall go.’ There was a cackle, and the witch drew a finger across her throat in a gruesome gesture. Rue stopped stirring and stared at her in horror. The stew began to burn on the bottom.

‘Dinner!’ screeched the witch, ‘or it will be *you* going into the compost, you boil-bottomed wastrel!’



‘W Rue asked the mushroom fairy that evening, when they were huddled in the cage.

‘Tomorrow,’ said the fairy gloomily. ‘Worst night of the month. She takes something away to her compost on the moonless night.’

There was a whimper from Jack, and a whine from the little bear. The elf had come out of the storeroom to sit by the bars. Rue looked sadly at her and felt so miserable she could not speak.

The mushroom fairy lifted his head up from where it had drooped on his thin chest. He sniffed the air. He stood up, sniffing more vigorously, moving closer to Rue until he was at her shoulder, snuffling like a bloodhound.

‘What is it?’ said Rue.

‘I... *sniff*... smell... *sniff*... some... *sniff*... thing... *sniff*... *marvellous!*’

‘What do you think it is?’ The elf asked. ‘I also thought I felt something light and fae coming in today.’

Rue looked between them, wondering what they meant.

‘You have something,’ the mushroom fairy said. His wizened little face grew more animated than she had ever seen it. He resumed sniffing. ‘In there!’

Rue put a hand to her large pocket inside her gown.

‘It’s a knife,’ she pulled it out. It was small and beautifully decorated with a carved hilt. She slid it from its sheath and the narrow blade gave a little flash of light in the murky light of the dying fire.

‘Fae-made,’ said the elf, stretching a longing hand towards it, but unable to touch the air beyond the enchanted bars. ‘Where did you get it?’

‘My friend,’ said Rue. ‘But I don’t know what use I can put it to. I don’t suppose I can kill a witch with it?’

Much as she hated the witch, Rue shrank from the idea of killing her, but if she had to save a life, could she...?

‘You cannot kill a witch with so small a knife,’ said the elf. ‘Her black magic would quickly mend any wound.’

‘But I could cut these bars!’ Rue said, the thought coming to her in that moment. She lunged at the nearest bar and sawed through it. The knife cut through the bar easily enough, but as fast as Rue cut, the bar remade itself again. Rue groaned and sat down again.

The mushroom fairy was still sniffing. ‘You have something else,’ he insisted, pointing at her pocket.

Rue pulled out the little package. It felt a bit knobbly, but she unwrapped it and looked at it in disappointment. ‘There’s nothing in it,’ she said, wondering why Myrtle had given her a piece of empty cloth. She’d said something about its contents, but Rue had been too anxious about the wakening witch to remember what Myrtle had said. ‘It’s just a little rag. No good for anything.’

But the mushroom fairy was hopping from one little foot to another.

‘What is it?’ the elf urged. ‘I cannot see from here.’

‘Merciful mushrooms!’ squeaked the fairy.

Rue looked down at the cloth and back at the fairy, thinking he had gone a little mad.

‘Merciful mushrooms! There, there!’ He was dancing with glee.

‘Oh yes!’ cried the elf, standing on tiptoes to peer in. ‘Now I see them!’

‘See what?’ said Rue.

‘Mortals cannot see them,’ said the fairy. ‘But you have three merciful mushrooms!’

‘Is it enough?’ said the elf, her face gaining a luminous glow as though something revived within her.

‘Enough for what?’ said Rue, casting her mind over what she knew about merciful mushrooms, but she only knew that they had wonderful healing properties. Now that she thought about it, she recalled that they were invisible. Could they be

used to impart some strength to them all?

‘I think it is enough,’ said the mushroom fairy. Rue had never heard a mushroom fairy laugh or seen one dance before. He had always seemed a dry and shrivelled grey old thing. But this was a glimpse of an entirely new creature before her. She stared at him, and she was not the only one to wonder.

‘*Why... so... happy?*’ The mother bear said in her halting, growly voice. Ben-who-was-really-Jack lifted his head and sniffed the air. He shuffled a few steps closer, walking on all fours.

‘No, no, no!’ yelled the mushroom fairy, snatching the little cloth away as Jack thrust his face towards it as though to eat its invisible contents. ‘Get back, donkey-brain!’

‘His name’s Jack,’ Rue said, thinking that there was enough name calling in this dreadful pit of despair as it was. ‘And why can’t he eat a merciful mushroom? He’s been limping these past days. it would mend his foot.’ She reached out a hand for the cloth.

‘Are you mad?’ The mushroom fairy hissed. ‘He’s limping because he put his foot in a patch of moribundus, when I told him not to go near them. They give a nasty sting.’

‘He’s a donkey trapped in a man’s body, he can’t know where he can and can’t go,’ said Rue, feeling a guilty pang that it was her fault that Jack was as he was. ‘Let him have a mushroom. You said there was three of ‘em.’ She stretched out a hand again.

‘Are you mad?’ The fairy repeated, his little black eyes bulging with fervour, giving him the impression of the mad one.

‘She does not know,’ the elf said from behind the bars. ‘Tell her.’

‘Tell me what?’

The fairy clutched the cloth tightly to his little chest and laughed. He really *was* going mad, thought Rue.

‘One merciful mushroom will halt the effects of deathcap,’ he said, followed by a mushroomy chuckle. ‘*Two* merciful mushrooms will weaken the power of dark magic.’ He made a little spin of delight. ‘And *three* merciful mushrooms will render even a sorceress *powerless!*’ He jiggled and laughed together.

‘Powerless?’ said Rue. ‘Powerless?’ she asked the elf, who nodded vigorously. ‘Forever?’

‘Sadly not,’ said the elf. ‘When the effect begins to wear off, she will replenish her strength with deathcap again.’

‘But would she be powerless long enough for us to...?’ Rue could barely speak the word, so laden with hope beyond measure was it.

The mother bear growled out the word for her: ‘*E-s-c-a-p-e...*’

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their plans in a such a state of growing excitement that they did not notice that the cottage was altered by degrees as their hope burgeoned. The darkness grew thinner and less tangible. The mischief of the enchanted household objects ceased: the poker and candlestick remained as a poker and candlestick, the fire glowed yellow as any ordinary fire would do, without the malevolent tinges of green and black; the smell of decay lessened. They slept not a wink and were so engrossed in going over their plans that when the sound of the garden gate creaking open came, signalling the witch’s return, they were amazed that dawn was already breaking. The elf scurried back to her hiding place, and Rue hushed Jack desperately, needing him to pretend to be asleep, as they all ought to be.

The witch always came in tired and crotchety. Whatever it was she did in the hours of darkness, it drained her of strength, thus she did not notice the change in the room or the soft, brave ray of sunlight that pushed through a crack in the door. She did not notice there was almost a feeling of cheer from the fireplace, and that her broomstick had given a little twitch of relief as it rested against the wall. She was too empty and in need of deathcap, so she cursed and growled and ordered out the bears to work, kicking Jack out on his rear and glowering at the fairy.

Rue did not wait to be snarled at, but set about making breakfast immediately. When she came to drop the dried deathcap into the cauldron, she broke it so only half a piece dropped in. In her other hand she held an invisible merciful mushroom; she could feel it resting lightly against her palm but could not see it; she only trusted that it was really there as she tipped her hand over the cauldron and stirred.

The fire flared up as soon as its tongues of flame touched the cauldron with the mushroom inside.

‘What was that?’ snapped the witch from her dim and dusty corner, where she sat scraping at something in the gloom.

Rue feigned ignorance, ‘What was what?’ she said, stirring vigorously. The witch sniffed the air, and Rue held her breath. What if she could tell what Rue had done? The fairy had not said whether the witch could smell or sense the mushroom.

‘There’s a foul smell in here,’ growled the witch. ‘Like strange magic.’ She stood up and shuffled towards the fireplace. Rue’s heart began pounding. The witch paused, then cackled and sat back down. ‘I know what the smell is,’ she muttered. ‘The smell of elf. She’s been ripening away in there, well it’s time for plucking.’ It was only then that Rue realised what the witch had been doing: she was sharpening her knife, her bone-handled knife with a blade black and serrated and cruel.

‘Merciful Mushrooms,’ breathed Rue under her breath. ‘Please, in the name of the Green Lady work for us, or the elf will be no more tonight.’ A hot tear dropped into the cauldron she was stirring, without her noticing, and her whispered words floated down like feathers. The pottage gleamed once, not a witch-green, not the green of slime and decay, but a new-leaf green. It was so small a gleam that Rue, blinking back her tears, missed it. But the air lightened a few degrees more, and the witch threw down her sharpening file in a fit of vexation and bellowed for her breakfast.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS OF PLEASURE

‘Master Charmall is returning to open a ball – how *delightful*!’ Mistress Elftyn gushed.

Mistress Weston and Emma exchanged a look. How *disagreeable*, was Emma’s thought, to have run into Mistress Elftyn on their way to Ford’s.

‘Of course, I know who this is in honour of,’ said Mistress Elftyn. ‘I am not so ignorant of how many dinners and tea parties and suppers have sprung up since my arrival. I am not unaware, I assure you. I am *very* sensible of all compliments. But a May-time ball, how delightful, how very rustic and countrified. I am all for joining in these old country traditions now that I find myself tucked away in the heart of village life. I understand there is always a May queen of the dance who leads the way, and I shall be honoured. Absolutely honoured. I shall even put a new trim on my wedding gown for such an occasion.’

M to say several times that she was not going to let the presumption of Mistress Elftyn spoil her pleasure, but Harriet was not in the mood for a ball at all. She could not understand why Mistress Woodhouse was so pleased about it. It was the strangest thing, but as soon as Master Frank Charmall had come riding back into Highbury and walked into Hartfield’s drawing room, Mistress Woodhouse had seemed quite an altered creature.

Could Mistress Woodhouse be in love? That would explain the brightness of her eyes, much brighter than usual. It would explain her high colour and her distracted air. Though Harriet would like very much to be distracted from her worries at such a time, she could not forget them so soon. She could not forget Rue and Myrtle and Benjamin Larkins. Could not forget the disaster of Mother Goodword’s wand eaten and her school closed down, not to mention her own failure to graduate and the bleak, uncertain future that loomed ahead.

But here was Mistress Woodhouse, always so proper, so perfect, so composed, acting as though she had not a care in the world save to choose what gown she would wear at tonight’s ball.

Harriet was beginning to harbour a suspicion. She noticed that whenever Frank Charmall was in the room, those he directed his attentions to fell under his charm as though it were a spell. Could it be the case? As she followed Mistress Woodhouse into her pretty and spacious dressing room, she’d tried to talk to her about it, but Mistress Woodhouse only laughed, and those too-bright eyes of hers quite crinkled with humour.

‘Frank Charmall casting an enchantment over us all! Why, Harriet, you have been reading too many romances. I never met a more gentlemanlike man. Why

Frank Charmall was something of a puzzle that night. When he was with her, as he generally was, she felt all the warmth of his regard, and she basked in it as in summer sunshine. They laughed together at his nonsense; she permitted his flirting, which never trespassed beyond the boundaries of good taste, and comprised a good deal of flattery, and they danced beautifully together, being just of the right height to make excellent partners. In short, they were quite the golden couple of the ball, and she knew it.

But now and then something odd happened. When Frank left her side and talked with his village friends, such as the Bayteses, that feeling of warmth and goldenness, which she could only attribute to romantic love, it melted away, and instead of a radiantly handsome young man she saw across the room only a modestly handsome youth. Still handsome, to be sure, but not dazzlingly so. Not irresistibly so.

She watched him dance with Jane Fairfayce and was struck by the change of countenance he showed. Gone was the easy humour and grace, and in its place was something almost like *desperation*. Why, he almost looked as haunted as poor Jane herself did. To see them clasping hands as they passed in the dance one could almost think that one was looking upon a pair of star-crossed lovers, desperate to be near to one another, and anguished as the dance separated them and sent them turning away to other partners.

Emma pondered these things as she sipped at her wine glass, while she rested for a space between dances. She must be imagining all these strange sights and emotions. Perhaps the wine was stronger than she was used to.

The dance ended, and she could see Frank among the crowd, returning to her side. For one moment she thought she saw that agonised expression on his face again. Who was it he turned to throw a glance at over his shoulder? She could not see with so many people pressed together. He reached her side, and she felt something *click* into place, and his haunted expression was quite gone, and she decided she must have imagined it, for he was now smiling and bright and insisting that they dance once again, and all her warm feelings returned.

Harriet was delighted with the ball as her friend. What would Myrtle and Rue think of her if they saw her now? They would think she had no heart. She determined not to be distracted by pleasure, but to apply herself to sensing the crowd about her, watching for signs of anything out of the ordinary. She lingered at the back of the ballroom, trying to avoid being seen and asked to dance, that she might be free to observe.

Mistress Weston spoiled her seclusion by spying her and pressing Master Elftyn to ask her to dance. Harriet and Master Elftyn's eyes met briefly at this prompting of Mistress Weston's, and it would be hard to say whose glance held the most disdain. Harriet could not bear to stand up in the dance with him! A man who lied and tried to coerce her friend into an engagement through a love potion – and she had thought him the most delightful creature she had ever known. Her cheeks flamed at such a remembrance of her own folly.

Master Elftyn clearly recalled the last time they had set eyes on one another, on that fateful night of Midwinter, as he stood in his garden, the snow falling on his dark hair and black cloak, while he railed and rowed and told Harriet she was the worst Godmother ever!

Their eyes clashed and then recoiled. Harriet turned her head aside to conceal her blush of vexation, while he lifted his chin and declared that his dancing days

were over, before turning away.

A shadow fell upon Harriet and she looked up in surprise to see Master Knightley standing close to her, holding out a hand and saying, 'Might I have your hand in this dance.'

She was so surprised that she put her hand in his and stood up, before she had time to formulate a polite refusal.

Her feelings regarding Master Knightley were not unpleasant, as they were with Master Elftyn, but they were no less uncomfortable. He had been appointed to her as her ward, and she had failed him. She had thrown him over for that shameful Master Elftyn and now had no clue where to begin in her matchmaking assignment with him.

Was there any point even trying to continue with her assignment, she wondered, as she stood opposite her partner, mirroring his bow with a curtsy before the dance began?

She had surely failed as a Godmother, and yet... ought she not to try? He looked altered, she noticed. Though he was immaculately dressed, he looked a little grim and very tired. She knew he had been watching the bridge these past months.

'You have been the guardian of the village a good while now,' she said, wishing to open a conversation with him.

He nodded. 'Someone must guard it. I hope your mistress will soon return and the bridge can be closed again. Though I should wish to see the young people come safely back across it first.'

Harriet could only nod her agreement. Trying to talk to him of marriage was a ridiculous notion at such a time. Mistress Woodhouse and Frank Charmall came dancing down the line, taking their turn.

'How happy she looks,' Harriet said, thinking aloud, as Mistress Woodhouse flashed a radiant smile in passing.

Master Knightley did not look happy as he watched the young couple whirl by, scattering laughter and energy as though they were dancing in a fairy ring. He fairly glowered at Frank Charmall as he passed. Perhaps Master Knightley had his concerns regarding this newcomer in the same way as she herself did.

'He is very charming,' she said, looking for a way to gauge Master Knightley's thoughts. 'Almost... *too* charming.'

Master Knightley met her eyes. 'Yes,' he said shortly. He held her look, as though asking a silent question, as though trying to deduce if she meant anything more by her words.

'I sometimes think...' she said, faltering as she searched for the right words, 'that his influence on Mistress Woodhouse is not in the common way.'

'Do you speak as a Godmother?' Master Knightley asked in a low voice, so that those nearest would not hear. 'Is this consideration due to your training in sensing, or whatever it is you call it?'

Was it? Harriet thought this over for a moment, watching Frank and Mistress Woodhouse as they gained the bottom of the set and stood laughing and catching their breath. That look in Mistress Woodhouse's eyes at that moment – it was so bright, *too* bright. It was not like her somehow. Something was not quite right. And Frank Charmall – one moment he was shedding smiles on his partner, casting a glow about them, and yet, there it was again, that strange, quick turn of the gaze away to someone else in the room, and while he looked away all the glow and merriment fell from him and a troubled, almost *desperate* look took its place. But it was all so fast, so brief, the space of the blink of an eye. It was only because Harriet was applying all her practice of sensing towards him that she caught it.

‘It is,’ she said, more decidedly. She met Master Knightley’s eyes again. ‘I sense they are very much drawn together, but I do not know if it is real.’

His own expression darkened with displeasure and something else – was it pain? But he would feel pained at anything untoward happening to Mistress Woodhouse; they were very old friends, as close as family.

‘You are concerned for her,’ Harriet said, speaking her thoughts aloud.

‘I am. And in more ways than one.’

‘She is like a sister to you,’ said Harriet, thinking of Myrtle and Rue and all the painful worry she felt for them.

‘A sister?’ he murmured, looking down the line again at Mistress Woodhouse, laughing at something her partner had just said. ‘Brother and sister,’ he repeated, as though the thought were a surprising and new one to himself. ‘No, indeed,’ he said decidedly, still in that surprised tone, as if he had just reached some new realisation. ‘No, indeed,’ he said softly, and turned his gaze away from the bottom of the line, as though he could not bear to see any more.

The dance was drawing towards its close when the door to the ballroom flew open, and exclamations of surprise burst forth as people turned to look.

A tall figure in a rumpled gown and wild black hair stood staring with eyes as blue and bright as jewels. She looked round as though searching for someone.

The music of the fiddles came to a screeching halt, as someone cried out, ‘It’s the witch come to curse us!’ Someone else gave a little scream of fright.

‘It is no witch,’ said Master Knightley in a loud voice, so all could hear. ‘I think I recognise her—’

‘Myrtle!’ cried Harriet, who could not get a clear view of the newcomer until that moment. She ran to meet her. ‘You’re back! Is Rue with you?’

It took Harriet some moments to puzzle out what it was about Myrtle that marked her out as unusual, other than her looking as though she had not combed her hair for a month – it was the feel of Faerie about her, and a strong smell of green magic.

‘I couldn’t bring her,’ Myrtle said. ‘Is Mother Goodword returned?’ Harriet replied that she had not.

‘Merciful Mushrooms,’ groaned Myrtle. ‘Where is Mistress Woodhouse, is she here?’

‘What do you want with her?’ said Master Knightley, ushering back the throng of guests who were all staring and whispering and wondering and trying to crowd in on Myrtle.

‘I need to warn her,’ Myrtle said. ‘It is imperative.’

‘What is it?’ Emma called out, also parting the crowd and advancing with quick steps. ‘Is it my father?’

‘It’s the witch!’ said Myrtle. ‘She’s coming.’

A BURST OF THREATENING EVIL

The ball was quickly broken up. No one wanted to keep dancing or supping with a witch on the prowl. Shawls and fans and tippets were snatched up, wine goblets hastily drained, carriages shrieked for, and the ballroom was soon desolate.

Emma refused to leave immediately. 'I must hear more,' she insisted. Only Master Knightley remained in the hall with Harriet and Sister Myrtle. Master Weston had been anxious to get his wife to the safety of Randalls, and Frank Charmall had taken charge of Mistress Baytes and her niece, to see them safely home.

'Where's the dragon?' Emma thought she heard Harriet whisper.

'Dragon?' repeated Emma. Something rustled from behind Sister Myrtle, but there was nothing to be seen.

'What do you know of this witch?' urged Master Knightley. 'Have you seen her in Highbury?' His hand moved to his hip, as though feeling for a sword. His face and figure were taut as though poised to spring into action.

'I come by way of the sorceress's house, the witch of the Wild Woods,' Sister Myrtle began. 'She's scheming something and it involves Mistress Woodhouse. She seeks her. That's all I know, but I was charged to warn you and so I have.'

'Where did you hear of this?' Master Knightley demanded.

'From Sister Rue, who is...' Myrtle looked distressed, 'who is trapped by her.'

'By the witch?' cried Harriet, 'Oh no! Poor Rue!'

Sister Myrtle moved to the centre of the hall. There was a sound of something tapping on the floor behind her, but nothing could be seen. She stood very still, seeming to be listening or expecting something.

Master Knightley and Emma exchanged a questioning look. This young woman was rather odd, to be sure, thought Emma, it was nearly enough to put one off any kind of Godmothering altogether if working with magic had this effect. But then she recalled that she had just come out of Faerie; that would account for a large degree of peculiarity.

'What is it, Myrtle?' said Harriet.

'Do you hear something?' Master Knightley asked.

Myrtle continued standing very still with a look of concentration on her face. 'I am trying to sense a change,' she replied.

'A change?' said he.

'In the air. All has been out of kilter since...' she looked stricken, 'since the day the magic was lost.'

'Since the day the magic was stolen,' said Master Knightley quietly.

'You know about the wand?' Harriet whispered, her light blue eyes widening in surprise. Then she clapped her hand over her mouth as Sister Myrtle glared at her. 'Sorry,' Harriet said. 'It popped out.'

‘Ah,’ said Master Knightley, as though Harriet had given him a revelation. ‘I only knew something had been stolen resulting in the border eroding these past months. So it was Mother Goodword’s wand, was it?’ He did not let them reply, but continued on. ‘That would explain things. The use of stolen magic would cause a deal of trouble. Is that why Mother Goodword disappeared, was she was removed from her position as a result of losing her magic?’

‘No,’ said Sister Myrtle, sharing a despondent look with Harriet. ‘She does not know of the loss of the wand. Not yet. But the wand truly is lost now.’ She listened again for a moment. ‘I don’t understand. I made a bargain with her, that if I were to do as she said, that my friends would be freed and all would be put right. But I feel no change. All is still out of kilter. Worse even than before I left. Did she deceive me?’

‘Who?’ asked Master Knightley. Emma could tell by his voice that he was growing impatient to learn the whole of this story.

‘The Green Lady.’

‘You have met the Green Lady?’ said Master Knightley in surprise.

‘You found her!’ exclaimed Harriet.

‘The real Green Lady?’ said Emma.

‘Is there a false one?’ asked Sister Myrtle, looking alarmed.

‘No, of course there is not,’ said Emma, ‘what I mean to say is, you met her in person? Not her representation, as in the Green Man at Hartfield?’

‘I met the Green Lady in her palace. And I made a wish, which she granted under conditions. I have kept those conditions, I am certain I have, but everything feels the same, and Rue is still in Faerie under the direst of circumstances.’

‘Not necessarily,’ said Master Knightley.

‘Of course!’ exclaimed Sister Myrtle. ‘I forgot about the time difference. The effects may not have rippled through Faerie to Highbury as yet.’ She looked relieved. But then her face fell again. ‘And yet... how shall I know? I must go back to find her. I cannot leave her in such a terrible place.’

‘Oh, poor Rue!’ Harriet exclaimed a second time. ‘We must do something!’

‘How did she become captive?’ asked Master Knightley.

‘I don’t know, I had no chance to ask her. But I know that she suffers.’

‘Emma, you must go home directly,’ said Master Knightley. ‘And I must watch the border.’

‘The witch is still in the Wild Woods, is she not?’ said Emma, turning to Sister Myrtle.

‘She was in her house when last I was there,’ admitted Myrtle. ‘And she did not pass me on my journey here, though she might well use paths unknown to me.’

‘Therefore,’ said Emma, turning to Master Knightley. ‘the witch has not entered Highbury yet. But what is to be done about the young Godmother held captive? What *can* be done? Is the young man with her? Have you seen him?’

‘Seen who?’ asked Myrtle.

‘Benjamin Larkins,’ said Harriet. ‘You did not know about him before you left. But he has gone missing too.’

‘I have not seen him,’ said Myrtle.

‘You must be so tired and hungry,’ said Harriet. ‘What have you been eating in Faerie?’

Myrtle shrugged impatiently. ‘Fruit. Nuts. Strawberries, mostly. I am not so ignorant of Faerie ways to know what is and is not safe to eat there.’ A memory seemed to cross her mind that belied her words, but she shook it off. ‘What does it matter?’ she said. ‘I cannot rest while Rue is in trouble. I will come with you to

watch the border,' she said, addressing Master Knightley.

Emma having been put in the carriage by Master Knightley, and the coachman given orders to drive to Hartfield as swiftly as was safe.

The lights of the manor were blazing out as the carriage approached, and Emma wondered that there should be so many lanterns lit at so late an hour. She had only expected her maid to be waiting up for her.

'Emma!' wailed a thin voice, as the carriage drew to a stop. 'Is that you?'

The carriage door was opened. 'Of course, Papa. But why are you not in bed?' A horrible thought began to creep over her, causing a prickle at the back of her neck: a prickle of unease that moved down her spine and tightened her stomach. She stepped out and her father shuffled as fast as he could towards her, looking dreadful.

'Now, Papa, I hope you haven't been paying heed to any rumours?'

'The witch! The witch is coming! The whole village is talking of it!'

'Now, Papa, you must be calm.'

'I must say the words, Emma!'

'No, Papa! Do not say the words! Papa, I beg you!'

But Master Woodhouse was half out of his wits with terror, and the words rolled off his pale tongue: '*Tower mighty, tower strong, keep my daughter safe from wrong.*'

Emma's final words of, '*No, Papa!*' faded away from her own ears as the horribly familiar sensation of being carried through the air seized hold of her, transporting her through great bricks of unearthly stone, up and up, round and round a spiralling stair to be deposited in the upper room of the tower, with the door magically locked behind her.

'*No, Papa!*' cried Emma, rushing to the single window, flinging wide the shutters to lean out, overlooking the entrance way of Hartfield, where the carriage below seemed as that of a child's toy, and her father was slumped upon the coachman's arm. 'Papa! Unsay it! Let me out!'

But Master Woodhouse, the Wild Man Guardian, had quite fainted away.

ESCAPE

The witch slept fitfully all morning and woke in a vile mood. ‘Dinner. Now,’ she snarled. ‘And brew. Black brew. Quickly, you pox-face sluggard.’

Her features were twisted and there was the appearance of small bruises appearing on her skin like strange liver spots. Rue had to force herself not to stare at the witch’s change of countenance; part of her was delighted to see that there was some effect on the old crone, but half of her was fearful at the malice in her eyes. Rue’s hand shook as she dropped the second merciful mushroom into the black brew, putting only half a deathcap into it instead of the usual whole one.

The witch snatched the cup from Rue’s hand when the brew was poured. Rue held her breath, watching to see the witch down it. The witch lifted it to her lips, then her head whipped up at Rue who stood watching.

‘What are you staring at?’ She narrowed her eyes. Rue gulped. ‘I... I...’ she stammered, ‘I’m thirsty.’ She licked her lips as though they were dry, and in truth they were. Her whole mouth felt parched from anxiety.

The witch sneered, and lifted the brew again to her curled lip, but halted, and sniffed over the rim of the skull cup. Rue thought she might faint from suspense; she had a dreadful habit of fainting when overwhelmed. She felt the tingling sensation that precipitated a faint, and sank down to her knees and held her head in her hands, willing the feeling to pass.

‘Forgot to eat and drink, did you?’ said the witch. ‘You mortals never last long. Well, you aren’t getting my victuals,’ and she downed the cup in one draught. Rue felt the faintness pass away as relief flooded her. Two mushrooms consumed. Only one left to go, and already the witch was altering before her eyes. She seemed to have shrunk a little, and the bruise patches on her skin were growing more pronounced. She looked more hideous than ever, so that Rue averted her eyes from the sight.

To tend her garden as she usually did. She remained studying the parchments on the table, making scratchy notes as she laboured over them. Her head kept nodding over the pages. She would jerk up again, scowl and curse and mutter and drop off to sleep for a moment. Rue watched anxiously as she tiptoed about her chores. Now that the hope of escape was so close, she felt taut and sick and strained almost beyond what she could bear. Too much was at stake. They would all perish here slaving under her. One by one they would all end up in her grisly compost heap, wherever that was, and tonight it would be the little elf who would disappear.

Rue's hand kept going to her pocket to touch the square of cloth within containing the last invisible mushroom.

'More brew!' said the witch from her corner. Her words were a little slurred. 'And make it strong.' She lapsed into muttering, and Rue caught stray words: *slugabed weary. Tired bones. More brew. Wallydraggie mortal. More brew.*

'Shall I put the last mushroom in her brew?' Rue whispered to the elf, as she reached for the box of deathcaps in the storeroom.

'No,' whispered back the elf. 'Better for them to be given at intervals. Too much together will—'

She did not finish her sentence, for at that moment a shadow filled the doorway, and the witch stood swaying and leering in. 'Give me the box,' she said, holding out her gnarly fingers.

Rue handed her the deathcaps.

'Some scallywag nincompoop useless plaguesore mortal can't make decent brew,' the witch slurred. 'I'll put it in myself.'

She yanked Rue's arm and tugged her out after her. Her grip was weaker, but it was still strong enough to pull Rue along. 'And don't think I've forgotten about you, you snivelling, mooncalf elfling,' added the witch with a weak cackle as the storeroom door vanished back into a dark alcove.

The witch rummaged through the box to find the largest of the deathcaps and dropped it into the cauldron where the water was coming to a boil.

Dismay struck Rue as a blow. If the witch were to strengthen herself with extra deathcap, it might undo the work of the mushrooms. She wondered what she ought to do, as she stood stirring the pot, pulling the kerchief she had tied about her neck up to cover her mouth and nose to avoid inhaling the black vapour. She had long learnt that if she breathed in the smell of deathcap, she was left crippled with despair for hours after.

While one hand stirred, watching for the bubbles to break the surface, the other hand kept straying to her pocket as she deliberated in her mind what to do.

'What's in your pocket that's so interesting?' said the witch in her ear, causing Rue to cry out and drop the ladle with a clatter on the hearthstone. She had been so absorbed in her thoughts, she hadn't noticed the old hag creeping up behind her. Quick as a flash, the witch's hand plundered Rue's pocket and pulled out the little knife and the package. Her eyes glinted as she examined the knife, turning it toward the firelight to see it more closely.

'Well, look at this,' she murmured. 'Cunning little elf blade. Sharp enough for...' she threw Rue a sly look, 'slaying little elves.'

Rue's stomach flipped over and over. She wanted to reach out and snatch back the little package. The knife was tossed onto the table, but all Rue could see was the scrap of cloth peeking out of the witch's fist. Her heart was hammering, her breath was caught in her chest.

'It's bubbling, you clapperdudgeon!' shrieked the witch, jolting Rue into taking a gasp of air and unhooking the cauldron to pour out the brew. The witch snatched up the cup as though she were parched and drank it to the dregs. She gave a gasping sigh as she thrust the cup back at Rue. 'More,' she said, and Rue forced her shaking hands to pour out a second cup, but all the while she was watching the fist that enclosed the precious mushroom and feeling sick to her core.

Were all their plans to end in failure? The witch had certainly been weakened by the two mushrooms, but now she was regaining strength through extra draughts of black brew. Hope dwindled, and the room grew darker, the fire flickered with a black tinge, and the smell of decay was stronger than it had ever been.

‘What’s this?’ said the witch, opening her hand and peering down. ‘Snot rag!’ She held out her hand for the second cup, but the cloth still sat on her grimy palm.

A stroke of inspiration lit upon Rue, and she sneezed hard, sloshing half the contents of the cup.

‘You galumphing guttersnipe!’ yelled the witch, grabbing at the cup and shoving the cloth at Rue as Rue pretended to be garnering another explosive sneeze.

She could have laughed and cried at the same time as her fingers took hold of the cloth and she pressed it to her nose.

‘Sorry,’ she mumbled, sniffing and dabbing at her nose. ‘There’s a bit more in the pot.’ She leaned over the cauldron to see, and as she did so, she thought she saw a little plop break the surface of the black brew. She looked at the cloth in her hand, it had come unfolded in her nose-blowing act. She stared at it and back at the cauldron. How was she to tell if the mushroom had fallen out or not? But a sparkly gleam spreading across the surface of the brew told her the answer.

‘Pour it, you poxweasel,’ snapped the witch, and Rue did as she was bid. ‘Sneeze over my brew and I’ll...’ there was a pause as the witch drained her cup. She pulled a face. She looked down into the bone cup, examined the bottom, looked back up at Rue, who was watching her closely with her breath held. The witch staggered back and dropped into her chair. Her face was growing purple and black in awful blotches.

‘What—?’ whispered the witch. But she could say no more. She did not look like a powerful sorceress, she looked like a harmless old woman, slumped in her chair while the air in the room grew lighter and clearer.

The door to the storeroom flew open; the door to the garden flew open; in rushed the bears and Ben-who-was-Jack, the fairy and the elf.

‘We felt it,’ said the fairy. He looked at the unconscious figure in the chair. ‘We felt the whole air change. But you gave it to her too early.’

‘I couldn’t help it,’ said Rue, ‘but what does it matter? She’s out of it, and the doors are open, so let’s go!’

The front door, which never opened without the witch’s say-so, yawned open easily as Rue yanked it wide.

‘Go!’ she urged them, turning back a moment to snatch up Myrtle’s knife from the table. She thought of taking up the black-bladed knife also, it might come in useful, but something about the wickedness of the blade stayed her hand; she wanted no part in anything made by sorcery.

But the box of deathcaps lying on the hearth where the witch had put them – the witch would strengthen herself with them when she woke, so Rue took up the box and flung it on the blazing fire. The flames licked over the black wood. She watched, but as the witch made a moan and lifted her head a few inches. Rue determined not to linger a moment more, and ran for the door.

Down the path she ran, the others were at the gate, the mother bear wrenched at the latch, but the gate would not open.

‘Over it!’ shouted Rue. ‘Climb over!’ The Bear took hold of a fence post to clamber over, and the post shot up high into the air, too high for her to reach.

‘What’s going on?’ Rue said, panting as she joined the others. ‘I thought the mushrooms would stop her powers?’

‘If you’d given them slowly to her, it would have weakened all her workings,’ said the mushroom fairy crossly. ‘But you went and double-dosed her, enough to put her out for a while, but not enough time for her workings to fade.’

‘Well, how long will it take?’ Rue demanded, watching as the bear tried to cross the fence at different parts, and being thwarted at each attempt by the growing fence

posts.

‘The elf knife,’ Rue said, pulling it out. ‘It cuts through anything.’ She sawed at the latch at the gate, hoping it would not re-join, as the cage bars had done. ‘It’s working!’ she called back as the bone gave way beneath the blade.

As the latch yielded and the gate fell open, Rue gave a shout of triumph, but her voice was drowned out by a deafening explosion behind them. Black bricks and burning thatch and great slivers of wood came raining down upon the garden.

Rue turned to see a great hole in the cottage roof.

‘What did you do?’ The fairy cried.

‘The deathcaps!’ said Rue. ‘I put them on the fire!’

‘Good thinking,’ approved the elf as she scrambled to her feet, making for the gate, dodging a falling clump of burning straw.

‘Not good if it wakes her up,’ said the mushroom fairy, as he batted at his beard, where a spark had fallen.

‘With any luck, it’s blown her up with it,’ said Rue as the bears loped across the ground to the gate.

Ben-who-was-Jack was running in circles with his flannel shirt alight from a falling ember.

‘Come here!’ Rue shouted, running after him, ‘you’re on fire!’ But the donkey inside the body of Ben was braying in terror and would not let Rue catch him.

‘You’ll wake the dead with that racket!’ And stopped, frozen in horror, as her words came to pass.

There in the blackened, blasted doorway of the cottage stood the witch. Smoke wreathed around her, giving her a spectral appearance. As the black ash floated down upon the garden, like black flakes of snow, black with the poison of deathcaps, Rue felt the old heaviness and dread descend again.

‘Going somewhere, dearie?’ said a growl from out of the smoke.

At the sight of her, Ben brayed in terror, and ran full pelt into the fence, hammering against the bone posts in vain, but at least managed to put out the flame on his shirt as he fell to the ground and rolled on his back.

‘Run!’ Rue yelled to everyone, as the gate swung back upon itself in closing. Rue stood in the middle of the garden, knowing with nightmarish certainty that the witch was summoning up the power to keep the gate closed. Three mushrooms had not been enough. She was stronger than they’d realised, though she was struggling.

The gate was closing inch by inch. Rue could only stand helplessly, willing her friends to reach it in time, and watching the witch’s movements as she raised her hands summoning up flickers of magic.

Rue knew what she must do. She ignored the elf’s cries for her to run for the gate, and instead she ran for the witch.

The witch was weakened just enough for Rue to catch her off guard as she slammed into her, bowling her to the ground, where they grappled for what felt like an age.

Rue was hurled off, and rolled across the stone slabs of the threshold, instinctively throwing her arms over her head. She turned her face away as the witch gave a snarl of rage and flung all the gathered power in her fingers at her. Where the blows of magic struck, it was like being stung by a hive of angry fae bees. The pain was fierce and cruel.

Rue dared to lift her head to look across the garden and was glad to see that even Ben had managed to escape. The bears were bawling out on the other side of the fence, Ben was hawing like a trumpet, the fairy and elf were calling her name in desperation. ‘Go!’ Rue called back as loud as she could with what remainder of

strength she had left. Then the witch reached back her arms to strike at her again, and Rue braced herself for the end.

A of words passed through Rue's mind in those moments before the witch made her final attack.

The first word was in the witch's voice, and the word was *Death*.

Rue's weakened body could not bear blow upon blow of poisonous stings, nor the choking sensation about her neck. She was going to die that day.

The second word was that of Rue's gran, who had died some years ago. At the edges of Rue's peripheral vision, she saw her gran, looking young again, and holding out a hand to Rue, saying, *Home*.

Rue smiled and closed her eyes, feeling a strange peace creep over her. She was sinking too far into oblivion to see what was happening to the witch at this moment. She did not see the witch draw back and hiss.

Rue heard the third and final word unfurl quietly and cleanly in her mind; and this word was in the voice of the Green Lady. *Sacrifice*.

The witch staggered back, as though some invisible power had pushed her. The whole house came alive; charred beams of wood from the caved-in roof flew into a barricade to trap her against the side of the house. She snarled, and she cursed, and she clawed against the beams, but they would not release her. Rue could dimly hear all this, but it was faint and dull and the blows on her skin were burning and stinging and keeping her in a haze as she teetered on the brink of life and death. Something gathered her up in a strong, hairy grasp. The bear had returned and scooped her from the ground, and Rue was carried out of the gate, into the woods, with the word *sacrifice* singing from every leaf and blade of grass that was not marred by darkling power.

'*I'll find you!*' came a furious shriek, thin and shrill. '*You'll pay for this!*'

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Will Rue survive her ordeal?
Will Emma be free from the tower?
Will the mystery of the thief be discovered?
What act of vengeance will the witch plot next?
Can things get any worse?
Of course they can!

Read on to find out what happens next in
[Midsummer Madness](#)

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